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The New Criterion

March 1989

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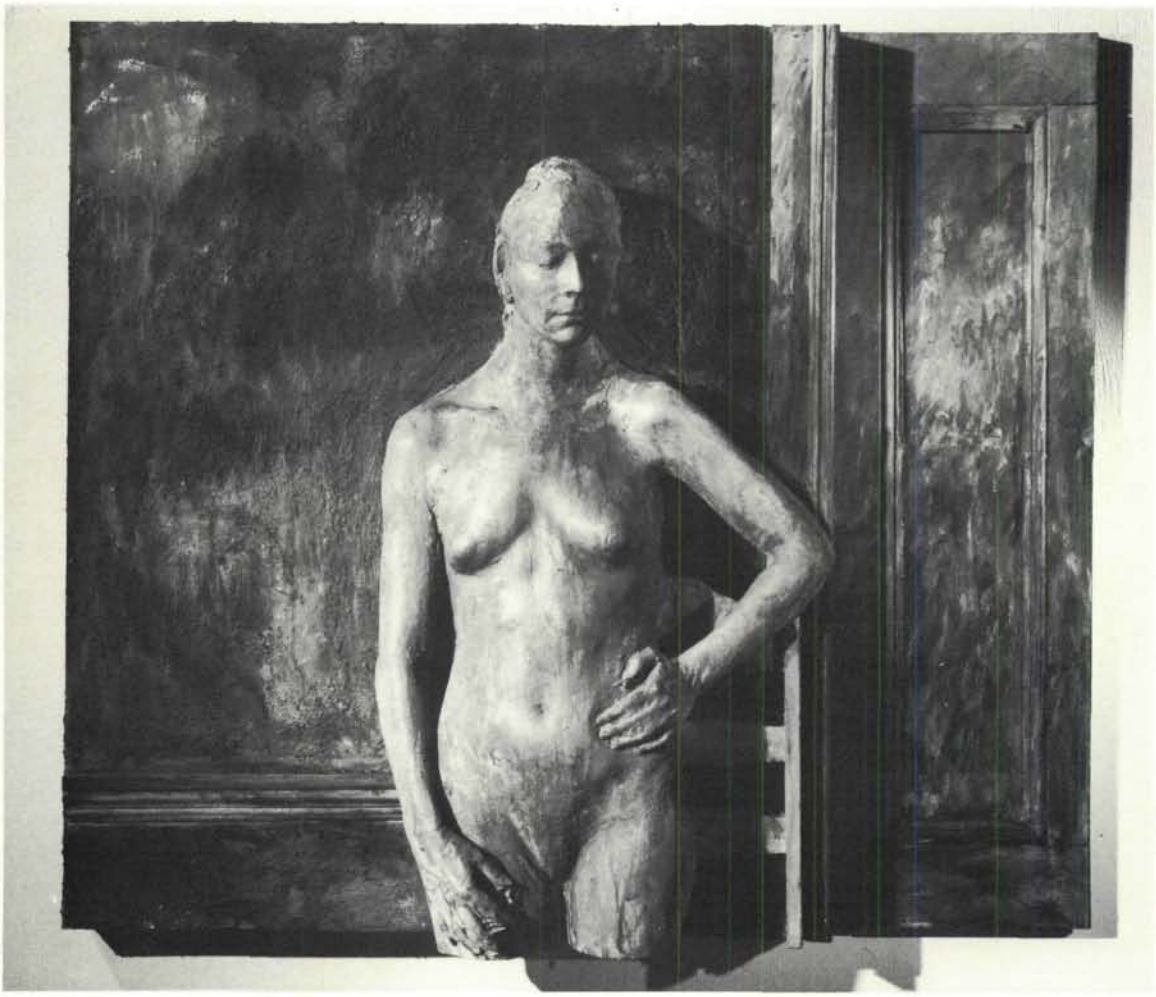

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Was Rothko an abstract painter?

by Hilton Kramer

You might as well get one thing straight . . . I'm not *an abstractionist.*
—Mark Rothko to Selden Rodman, 1957

It has long been one of the curiosities of abstract art that so many of its practitioners have denied that they were in fact abstract artists. To have created works of art that were seen to be "merely" a mode of abstraction has been, for these artists, a considerable vexation, and some have gone to great lengths to—in their view—set the record straight on this question. But whether they actually succeeded in this project of denial or only added further impediments to our understanding of abstract art—including their own—remains a matter of debate.

It is a debate, moreover, that is certain to acquire a renewed momentum now that abstract art has lost its radical status and has passed into the hands of the art historians as a subject for research and interpretation. It is when an art no longer commands the distinction of radical novelty, and therefore no longer serves as a model for a new generation of "advanced" artists, that the task of explaining its "meaning" becomes especially problematical. A change in taste occurs, and the old aesthetic loyalties no longer obtain with the force they once did. There is a need to understand what it was about this art that held so many gifted artists in its thrall and persuaded so many connoisseurs of its importance. At the same time, however, there is likely to be a revisionist impulse at work in this search for "meaning"—an impulse that seeks to align the old art under study with the interests of the new art that has displaced it. If, as happens to be the case at the present moment, these interests are more closely focused on the "content" of art than they are on its form, then we can expect the new interpretations of abstract art to follow a similar course.

This is what I believe has now happened with the study of abstract art in general and Abstract Expressionism in particular. Abstraction continues to be copiously produced, of course—and sometimes at a significant level of aesthetic achievement. But it can no longer be said to set the agenda for new artistic developments. (This doesn't mean that it might not do so again at some future date, but that is a different question.) Hence the proliferation of attempts to explain what abstract art was really about in its heyday.

What makes the whole issue especially perplexing is the even more fundamental question of whether this debate about the "meaning" of abstraction, though initially prompted by the effort of certain abstract artists to deny that they *were* abstractionists, makes any discernible difference in our experience of the works themselves. When, for example, we find ourselves in the presence of Mark Rothko's *Number 22* (1949) in the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art, what is there in

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what we see in the abstract forms of this painting that can be taken to refer to, or to embody, the metaphysical "subject" which the artist himself claimed for the work? Is that claim to be taken literally? If not, then in what sense is it to be taken? If we cannot actually *see* the artist's metaphysical "subject" in the physical object he has created for the avowed purpose of giving it expression, how can that subject be said to be present in the work?

Questions of this sort have often been raised about Mark Rothko's abstract paintings—the paintings, that is, that he produced from 1949 until his death in 1970—and with good reason. For it is well known that Rothko himself spurned the very idea that he was in any sense an abstract painter, yet the paintings themselves have long been taken—both by those who love them and by those who do not—to represent a particularly pure and even extreme form of abstraction. In his lifetime, Rothko made this issue of denial a crucial test for his admirers, and as a result they tended, by and large, to support his claim without significantly clarifying it. On at least one occasion, however, the claim was upheld so zealously that even Rothko appeared to shrink from endorsing it. I refer to the catalogue written by Peter Selz for the Rothko exhibition he organized at the Museum of Modern Art in 1961. In the short essay that Mr. Selz wrote for that catalogue, he began by declaring that "[Rothko's] paintings can be likened to annunciations," and invoked the example of Fra Angelico to support such a reading. He ended with a flight of interpretative fancy that, though it was obviously intended as lavish praise, the artist himself recoiled from. The relevant paragraphs of Mr. Selz's text are too long to quote here in their entirety, but the following excerpts will convey something of their flavor:

> Eventually as other images occur to the viewer the metaphor of the creation of some universe becomes paramount. And increasingly—in the mind of this writer—these "shivering bars of light" assume a function similar to that loaded area between God's and Adam's fingers on the Sistine ceiling . . . . Rothko has given us the first, not the sixth, day of creation.
>
> The open rectangles suggest the rims of flame in containing fires, or the entrances to tombs, like the doors to the dwellings of the dead in Egyptian pyramids, behind which the sculptors kept the kings "alive" for eternity in the *ka* . . . . Indeed, the whole series of these murals brings to mind an Orphic cycle; their subject might be death and resurrection in classical, not Christian, mythology; the artist descending to Hades to find the Eurydice of his vision. The door to the tomb opens for the artist in search of his muse. [1]

This was surely less a case of an "artist in search of his muse" than of an art historian in search of something—anything—to say about an art he couldn't comprehend. Never mind that Rothko himself, with all his talk about myth and tragedy and timeless subjects, had been responsible for leading Mr. Selz astray. Artists are given license in these matters that art historians appropriate at their peril. What Mr. Selz wrote on that occasion was all the sheerest nonsense, and was perceived to be nonsense at the time. Sidney Geist wrote a hilarious and devastating analysis of the essay in a short-lived publication called *Scrap*, and Rothko himself then asked the museum to withdraw the essay when it sent his exhibition abroad. I followed these developments with a keen interest while they were occurring, and not only because Mr. Geist and his collaborator on *Scrap*, Anita Ventura, were friends and colleagues but because the essay that I had commissioned the late Robert Goldwater to write about the Rothko show for *Arts Magazine*, which I was then editing, was the one that Rothko selected for the catalogue accompanying the European tour of the exhibition.

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1 *Mark Rothko,* by Peter Selz; published by the Museum of Modern Art in 1961.

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Well, all of this happened a long time ago, and would scarcely be worth recalling now if not for the publication of a new book on Rothko that makes an even more elaborate attempt to illuminate the artist's "subject" than the one Mr. Selz undertook nearly thirty years ago. Given the changes that have occurred in the intellectual climate of the art world, it is my impression that this new book—Anna C. Chave's *Mark Rothko: Subjects in Abstraction*[2]—is likely to meet with a more sympathetic response than Mr. Selz's essay did. And, of course, the artist is no longer around to register his objections and thereby discredit a fanciful interpretation of his work. We are indeed in a new period, and I have an awful feeling that Professor Chave's book may very well represent its spirit—at least as far as the study of abstract art is concerned.

Thus, where Mr. Selz spoke only of "images [that] occur to the viewer," which obliquely acknowledged that they were, after all, *his* images rather than Rothko's, Professor Chave seems to believe that the images—or "traces," as she sometimes calls them—that occur to *her* in studying Rothko's paintings are actually present (in some sense) in the work itself. At least she seems to believe this some of the time, and her professors at Yale, where the original version of this book was accepted as a doctoral dissertation in art history, were apparently persuaded that this represented a perfectly legitimate reading of the artist's classic abstract paintings. Yet Professor Chave also appears, at other times, to believe that Rothko was indeed an abstract painter, and that her principal "discovery" in this book—that the abstract paintings are filled with discernible references to entombment and nativity motifs (among much else)—in no way contradicts that belief. Which, at the very least, raises the whole question of what an abstract painting is. Is it an art in which we can find "traces" of whatever our hearts and minds and the fashionable methodologies of academic study may wish us to find, or does what can be seen—and not seen—in the paintings place a limit on what can be said to be present in the painting?

"No doubt Rothko," Professor Chave writes, ". . . did not consciously make all the quotations that may be discerned in his art, but that does not mean that they are not there." She then continues:

> The influence and the perpetuation of existing cultural forms is not something artists can fully escape, either by design or by ignorance. Tradition, as Harold Bloom wrote (following Freud), is "equivalent to repressed material in the mental life of the individual."

What, then, does the "repressed material" of Rothko's "tradition" consist of, according to Professor Chave?

The general answer she gives to this question is—well, almost everything that has been done in Western painting since the Renaissance. (Unlike Mr. Selz, she doesn't go back to the Egyptian pyramids, though in truth there is nothing in her method to preclude such an option.) "Landscapes" and "portraits" are discovered to abound in Rothko's abstract paintings—"Any of Rothko's classic paintings could be described as having a portraitlike aspect or as bearing a trace of portraiture," etc.—but it is in what Professor Chave calls their "vestiges or traces" of the figurative religious painting of the Renaissance that these paintings are claimed to be especially rich. Painful as it is for me to reproduce such nonsense in these pages, I am obliged to quote a representative passage from Professor Chave's book, lest the reader think that I am exaggerating the extreme—and extremely foolish—degree to which she has carried this bizarre project of interpretation:

> The pose of the sleeping infant Christ in Bellini's *Madonna and Sleeping Child* prefigures the martyred Christ in the "sleep of death," as found in Bellini's *Pietà*, for example. Those

2 *Mark Rothko: Subjects in Abstraction*, by Anna C. Chave; Yale University Press, 296 pages, $35.

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> images of Rothko's that parallel the pictorial structure of a pietà, such as *White Band (Number 27)* and *Number 20*, 1950, might be said at the same time to parallel the structure of a conventional mother and child image. Further, and by the same logic, such tripartite pictures as the untitled yellow and black painting of 1953, which bear a relation to the pictorial structure of an entombment, also bear a relation to certain conventional adoration or nativity images; in the first instance the deceased is laid on the ground before its attendants, and in the second, the infant lies sleeping on the ground at its mother's feet. But because Rothko's abstract figures are far removed from human form, in any case, the specific scale of the supine or horizontal figure relative to that of the erect or vertical figure—the factor that explicitly tells viewers of a mimetic image whether they are looking at an entombment or a nativity—has no bearing in Rothko's work. This basic schema, with a narrow band sandwiched between or below two larger masses, could yield an icon for the entire "human drama," then, from the "tomb of the womb" to the "womb of the tomb." His abstract figures could do (at the least) a double symbolic duty, that is, even where the symbols involved were opposing ones, such as birth and death. Rothko's image-sign enabled him to elide or dismantle such conventional binaries and present them not as polar opposites but as interconnected, two sides of the same process or phenomenon.

No doubt it was on the basis of interpretative feats of this kind that Professor Chave received her present appointment to the Harvard faculty. One hardly knows whether to laugh or cry.

"Viewers [of abstract painting]," Professor Chave writes, "are left in the tense and tantalizing position of feeling that they can almost but never quite grasp a message that they may sense as inhering in the pictures." And earlier on she observes that "The message of the abstract painting veers decisively away from the textual or narrative, the explicitly recognizable and specifiable, into a more indeterminate realm." Part of the problem with this kind of pictorial analysis, of course, is its crass assumption that an abstract painting is something like a telegram containing a "message" in a code we are called upon to crack. Professor Chave doesn't call Rothko's paintings telegrams, to be sure—she calls them "a palimpsest of traces," as any academic semiologist in good standing would, I suppose. "The larger purpose of this book," she writes, "is to show how Rothko's pictures function polysemically," which is as close as Professor Chave comes to acknowledging that the aesthetic issues in Rothko's paintings—and, indeed, the aesthetic experience they afford, or fail to afford—have little or no interest for her. Her method in this book obliges her to deal with Rothko's paintings as if they really are *texts* to be decoded. It is therefore no wonder that it is their alleged "message" that interests her, for there is nothing in her method that can account for anything else. And since the "message" itself is an invention of the author, the whole enterprise turns out to have remarkably little to do with Rothko or his art.

What it does have a lot to do with, however, is the current disfavor with which academic opinion views the aesthetics of abstraction and the priority that academic research now accords to the study of "content" in art even in cases, like this one, where the content has to be invented in order to serve as a subject suitable for study. I have to say that Professor Chave is quite brilliant at this kind of analytic invention; I am in as much awe of her powers of imagination as I am of her sheer intellectual effrontery. But the sad truth is, this book has nothing to tell us about Rothko or about abstract painting. It is a book—one among many, alas—about the crisis that has overtaken the study of art history in the universities.

Mark Rothko was hardly alone in rejecting the idea that he was in any sense an abstract artist. Many of the most illustrious names in the history of abstract art are known to have made similar denials. That many abstractionists were uneasy about

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venturing into this new aesthetic terrain, that they harbored doubts about the "meaning" of what they produced as abstract artists, that they sometimes made claims for their work, especially for its "content," that defy easy understanding and sometimes even credulity—these and many related questions have long been familiar to anyone who has studied the subject. But the answers to such questions do not lie in the impulse to "interpret" abstraction or to allegorize it or decode it as if it were a hermetic text. A painting isn't a text, and to pretend that it is one is to denigrate the very idea of abstract art, and to add yet another chapter—given its academic provenance, a particularly awful one—to the history of philistine response to its existence.

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The feminist takeover of Edith Wharton

by James W. Tuttleton

In a recent issue of the *Times Literary Supplement*, Marion Mainwaring has taken to task R. W. B. Lewis for errors of fact and interpretation in composing his *Edith Wharton: A Biography* (1975). These errors could have been avoided, she avers, if only Lewis had properly attended to the information that *she*—as his research assistant in Paris—had provided him back in the 1970s. Charging him with remarkable carelessness, she complains that "it is the nature, number, scale, and cascade-effect of Lewis's [errors] that are extraordinary."

It would be tedious to rehearse Lewis's alleged mistakes here: readers may consult her claims in "The Shock of Non-Recognition" (*TLS*, December 16-22, pp. 1394, 1405). But briefly they come down to a few mistranslations, some misspelled or misunderstood names, a few wrong addresses and dates, and an alleged misinterpretation of the cloudy relationship between Morton Fullerton, a scapegrace journalist in Paris, and his several inamoratas, one of whom was Edith Wharton herself. According to Ms. Mainwaring, she had no opportunity to read and correct the Paris chapters of *Edith Wharton* in page proof; hence, Lewis's errors survived into the published biography and have propagated errors in subsequent Wharton literary criticism. Most of Lewis's mistakes are repeated, she claims, in *The Letters of Edith Wharton* (1988), recently edited by R. W. B. Lewis and Nancy Lewis. There are also, Ms. Mainwaring ominously warns, serious deficiencies in Lewis's account of Mrs. Wharton's early life in New York—errors that will be corrected in Mary Pitlick's forthcoming *Edith Wharton's Formative Years*.

These are serious allegations. "Everyone makes mistakes," as Ms. Mainwaring concedes. And scholars and critics will be pleased to have the facts corrected at any stage of the developing scholarship of this subject. But readers with no access to the archives in Paris may well wonder why Ms. Mainwaring has waited *thirteen years* to bring forward such serious charges against so preeminent a biographer and editor of Mrs. Wharton's work. (After all, *Edith Wharton: A Biography* did win the Pulitzer Prize and the Bancroft Prize for history.) These charges are especially remarkable in view of Lewis's enthusiastic praise, almost fulsome in its extravagance, of Ms. Mainwaring's estimable detective work for him in Paris. Wouldn't it have been more responsible of her, if the charges are true, to have presented her *errata* back in 1975 when the book first appeared? A reader halfway familiar with Mrs. Wharton's life and work may experience, as I did, a curious effect in studying Ms. Mainwaring's charges: a rising sympathy for R. W. B. Lewis. Her essay is so embittered and incoherent, so mean-spirited and condescending, and so utterly muddled in its presentation of "corrective" detail that the reader may have difficulty following her arraignment. Given the absence of lucidity in

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her complaint, it is therefore entirely possible that Lewis *did* misunderstand what Ms. Mainwaring was trying to communicate to him. In this respect, all serious historians and biographers are at the mercy of research assistants who may or may not get things right, who may or may not communicate the data intelligibly.

Then, too, one's suspicions grow even more disturbing at Ms. Mainwaring's casual announcement that she is the author of a new manuscript on Morton Fullerton entitled *Mysteries of Paris*, now making the rounds. Is this hatchet job on Lewis a case of advance publicity—or a sensational claim meant to hook the attention of a potential publisher? Or is it merely that, in the thirteen years since the biography, she has turned up correct information that was not given to Professor Lewis? We will have to await, then scrutinize and verify, the facts she presents.

In the meantime—almost as if in concert with Ms. Mainwaring—R. W. B. Lewis's *other* research assistant for the 1975 biography, Ms. Mary Pitlick, has now complained in a *TLS* letter (December 30, 1988, p. 1443) that the Lewis biography also got wrong some facts of Mrs. Wharton's early life in New York and that he perpetuates some of these errors in the 1988 *Letters*. Various misspellings and misdatings are cited, and it is claimed that there are six thousand rather than four thousand Wharton letters extant. But the important complaint seems to be that Lewis had no evidence for claiming, based on a gap in her letter-writing, that Mrs. Wharton had a nervous breakdown between 1894 and 1896. Ms. Pitlick maintains that, although Mrs. Wharton told her publisher during this period that she had been seriously ill and was "not yet allowed to do any real work," her other letters reveal her to be "an ebullient woman going back and forth to Europe, revelling in French and Italian architecture and decorative arts, and ransacking shops for *antiquités* to furnish houses back home." According to Ms. Pitlick, then, Edith Wharton was a liar and Lewis her unwitting dupe.

In fact, however, Lewis's documentary evidence is abundant for Wharton's mysterious illness through the 1890s, culminating in a diagnosis of "neurasthenia" and treatment in Philadelphia under the supervision of Dr. S. Weir Mitchell, author of *Lectures on the Diseases of the Nervous System, Especially in Women* (1881). In his biography, Lewis conceded the riskiness of a layman's trying to diagnose Mrs. Wharton's medical complaints some eight decades after the fact, but his reasonable speculations, frankly advanced as such, were based on a wealth of commentary scattered throughout the letters, like the following remark, made not to her publisher but to her close friend Sara Norton in 1908:

> . . . for *twelve* years I seldom knew what it was to be, for more than an hour or two of the twenty four, without an intense feeling of nausea, such unutterable fatigue that when I got up I was always more tired than when I lay down. This form of neurasthenia consumed the best years of my youth, left, in some sort, an irreparable shade on my life. Mais quoi! I worked through it, came out on the other side . . . .

Why should Ms. Pitlick be at such pains to discredit Lewis's admittedly speculative and cautious account of her illness? Is there some resistance to the claim that Mrs. Wharton suffered an emotional disorder in the 1890s, a wish to make her appear wholly normal? If so, I find no need for it. The point is that Mrs. Wharton "worked through it" and became one of the six or seven best novelists that America has produced.

Perhaps readers will want to know a fact that Ms. Pitlick does not disclose in her carping letter: namely, that—as a result of her collaboration with Professor Lewis—in the early or mid 1970s she was put under contract to edit the Wharton letters; but, as the years passed and no progress on the edition seemed evident, the publisher broke the contract. The Lewises were then asked by Charles Scribner's Sons to bring out the 1988 edition. Is Ms. Pitlick resentful that the

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edition was taken away from her? Does she have knowledge of two thousand letters not known to the Lewises, or even concealed from them?

Whatever the answer, one thing seems evident. Ms. Pitlick's arraignment of Lewis; Ms. Mainwaring's preference for Cynthia Griffin Wolff's biography, *A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton* (1977); and her praise of Mary Pitlick's forthcoming *Edith Wharton's Formative Years*, which will "free the novelist from the erroneous context of the official biography" and thereby liberate critics from "feeling obliged to fit [Wharton's fiction] into the official biographical mould"—all of these attacks, blazoned on the occasion of this new edition of Mrs. Wharton's letters, mark a turn in Edith Wharton criticism that deserves some fuller consideration.

We may begin with the observation that as feminist literary criticism got into high gear in the mid-1970s, it was natural that critics with an interest in the status and condition of women, especially American women writers, should turn to Mrs. Wharton. This was an altogether positive development. After all, she has so much more literary importance and aesthetic significance than the horde of female scribblers then being advanced to eminence—for example, Augusta Jane Evans Wilson, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Fanny Fern, and Mrs. E.D.E.N. Southworth. These writers were being held out to us, with a straight face, as neglected geniuses worthy of comparison with Hawthorne, Melville, and Henry James. But Mrs. Wharton was in another league: one *could*, without embarrassment or hyperbole, intelligently compare her with Howells and James, Scott Fitzgerald and Sinclair Lewis, and others.

It was R.W.B. Lewis's 1975 biography that sparked a number of these fresh re-assessments of the woman and writer. An Edith Wharton Society was founded and the *Edith Wharton Newsletter* began to appear. Conferences were held at Mrs. Wharton's legendary mansion, The Mount, in Lenox, Massachusetts, also at her estate in France, and at Long Island University. Reprints of even the minor novels began to appear, sometimes by feminist presses, often with flamboyant introductions characterizing Wharton as an exemplary victim of the male patriarchy who, despite the enormous domestic pressures that drove her to a nervous breakdown, broke free of the Old New York taboos and re-created herself as a distinguished novelist whose major theme was the entrapment of women in marriage. That her first experience of passionate love occurred at the late age of forty-five, in an affair with the ne'er-do-well Fullerton, who betrayed her, added poignance to the account.

Yet there was an oddity in all this new attention given to Mrs. Wharton: she was being now advanced as a woman author neglected by the male literary establishment. A recent bibliographical essay on Wharton in *The Edith Wharton Newsletter* proposed that her status as "a major writer" only became evident in the literary criticism "produced between 1974 and 1983." And, indeed, at the 1988 conference of the Edith Wharton Society, speaker after speaker assumed as a given that Mrs. Wharton had languished in obscurity, stifled by the critical prejudice of the patriarchy, until the present generation of feminist critics had rescued her from oblivion. When I demurred at this, one indignant woman told me that, during all of her course work in a well-known graduate school, she had never even *heard* of Edith Wharton. (I took this as a commentary on the particular graduate school, if not on the commitment of the student to a self-motivated general mastery of the field—not as a measure of Mrs. Wharton's stature as a novelist, which has always been secure.) Others at the conference likewise assumed that Wharton had never been accorded the criticism due to so exemplary a portraitist of the victimization of women. All of this suggested to me a complete unfamiliarity with the massive bibliography of Wharton studies before the 1970s.

The fact is that Edith Wharton (1862-1937) achieved international celebrity in

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1905 with the publication of *The House of Mirth*, a brilliantly ironic dissection of frivolous high society in New York and a poignant account of a beautiful young woman's destruction at its hands. This remarkable novel was followed by works of near comparable literary power, including *Ethan Frome* (1911), *The Reef* (1912), *The Custom of the Country* (1913), *Summer* (1917), *The Age of Innocence* (1920), *Old New York* (1924), and *Hudson River Bracketed* (1929), as well as a number of brilliant short stories like "Roman Fever," "The Other Two," "After Holbein," "The Eyes," "Souls Belated," and "Autres Temps . . . ." Far from being neglected in her lifetime or needing rediscovery since, Mrs. Wharton always had an avid popular readership, was extensively and favorably reviewed, made a substantial fortune from fiction royalties, won the Pulitzer Prize in 1920, had many of her works translated, and witnessed several theatrical and film productions of her work in her lifetime. Although a thirty-year ban on the inspection of her private papers delayed Lewis's biography and other kinds of cognate criticism, the Wharton bibliography of interpretive studies, in every decade of her life and since, is quite substantial. It is difficult to think of another American novelist, man or woman, of any time, who has been accorded such popular *and* critical attention.

Not that the criticism was always positive. Certain left-wing critics always had it in for Mrs. Wharton. She was too rich, too socially privileged, too preoccupied with high society, too critical of our calculated democratic vulgarity to satisfy the proletarian yearning. Besides that, her métier—the novel of manners, particularly in its re-creation of Old New York—was immediately pronounced passé in the era of modernist experimentalism. Historical re-creations—like *The Age of Innocence* (1920), *Old New York* (1924), and *The Buccaneers* (1938)—whispered "the last enchantments of the Victorian age" to Robert Morss Lovett, proving that she was an anachronistic throwback to the forgotten era of Howells and James. But if she dramatized the *modern* inanity of the era of flappers and sheiks—as in *The Glimpses of the Moon* (1922), *The Mother's Recompense* (1925), and *Twilight Sleep* (1927)—her excoriations likewise proved that she was out of touch with contemporaneity and had outlived her own time. Besides, she was an expatriate who preferred France. In any case, her social conservatism was anathema to those convinced that the United States needed a socialist revolution.

The contempt in which she was held by such critics on the Left is suggested by John Curtis Underwood's *Literature and Insurgency: Ten Studies in Racial Evolution* (1914), which, while acknowledging her brilliance, dismissed it as uninteresting to real American he-men:

> . . . brilliancy is a patrician quality, of the superficial, by the superficial, for the superficial. It is intrinsically alien to the genius of the Anglo-Saxon world, in particular to that of its male half; and the great mass of the world in general has some reason for looking at it with suspicion.

Robert Herrick had earlier issued a like complaint in condemning Wharton's "singularly unreal and aristocratic literature," which contributed little toward "painting our national canvas"; he claimed, I think rather idiotically, that she wrote "perhaps too consciously well." Likewise, V. L. Parrington dismissed her in 1921 as "Our Literary Aristocrat":

> . . . she is too well bred to be a snob, but she escapes it only by sheer intelligence. The background of her mind, the furniture of her habits, are packed with a potential snobbery, and it is only by scrupulous care that it is held in leash. She is unconsciously shut in behind plate glass, where butlers serve formal dinners, and white shoulders go up at the mere suggestion of everyday gingham.

Alfred Kazin parroted these claims in *On Native Grounds* (1942). Although Mrs.

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Wharton—the author of more than forty books of fiction, poetry, drama, and autobiography—had attained the popular and critical esteem I have described, he dismissed her in the observation that "a great artist, even a completely devoted artist, she never became." Kazin preferred the proletarian Theodore Dreiser, a redskin who could not be accused of writing "too well" about wealth and poverty. Kazin dispatched Mrs. Wharton as "the biting old dowager of American letters" who was even blind to her real subject—the supplanting of the patrician aristocracy by the parvenu industrialists.

So commonplace were these objections to her work that Mrs. Wharton complained to her editor that "the assumption that the people I write about are not 'real' because they are not navvies & char-women" made her "feel rather hopeless. I write about what I see, what I happen to be nearest to, which is surely better than doing cowboys de chic." It is no wonder that Mrs. Wharton treasured the commendations she received, especially from younger writers like Fitzgerald and Sinclair Lewis. As she told Lewis in 1921, his praise of *The Age of Innocence* was "the first sign I have ever had—literally—that 'les jeunes' at home had ever read a word of me. I had long since resigned myself to the idea that I was regarded by you all as the—say the Mrs. Humphry Ward of the Western Hemisphere; though at times I wondered why." Indeed, why? She offers such a penetrating insider's critique of the intellectual and social limitations of her upper-class milieu that her work has outlasted that of every novelist and critic on the Left.

But it is not the irritation with Mrs. Wharton by the old-line Leftists that interests us now, or even the treatment of Wharton by other male critics, but rather the appropriation of Mrs. Wharton by the sorority of feminists. For there appears to be a new battle developing for control of Wharton criticism—for the power to reshape the dominant view of the woman and her work, of which the attack on R. W. B. Lewis's scholarship seems to me the first really direct, if ineffectual, salvo. No longer is the patrician class of Old New York, the moneyed aristocracy from which she emerged, the principal enemy of the new ideologues. No longer is Wharton's snobbery or her disdain of democratic vulgarity the issue. Rather it is the patriarchy itself, the constricted existence of women as created by the men of her class, that has become the focus of the new criticism.

Mrs. Wharton's protagonist Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth* (1905), for example, is no longer seen as a poignant instance of how "a *frivolous society* can acquire dramatic significance only through what its frivolity destroys," as Mrs. Wharton defined her intention in her autobiography (italics mine). Rather Lily, and Justine Brent in *The Fruit of the Tree* (1907), not to speak of other Wharton heroines, illustrate "Wharton's essential criticism of marriage as a patriarchal institution designed to aggrandize men at the expense of women," as Elizabeth Ammons put it in *Edith Wharton's Argument with America* (1980). Carol Wershoven, in *The Female Intruder in the Novels of Edith Wharton* (1982), concludes that "the woman in society is thus trapped—by rules (such as the double standard) not of her own devising, by a materialism that makes her only the chief ornament in her husband's establishment, and by a society that encourages her to remain a child, 'innocent' of reality and protected from life, while her man lives it elsewhere, in Wall Street, or the law office, or with another woman." Likewise Wendy Gimbel, in *Edith Wharton: Orphancy and Survival* (1984), remarks that in Wharton's world "the victim is woman, the passive creation of the patriarchy. Whatever individual talent the female may have, it is not strong enough to withstand the powerful force which demands her continued infantilization."

But the difficulty with seeing Mrs. Wharton and her heroines as pure victims of patriarchal domination is that it ignores completely the poignant, virtually identical

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infantilization of the men of her Old New York world—as illustrated in Newland Archer of *The Age of Innocence*, Ralph Marvell of *The Custom of the Country*, and Hayley Delane of *Old New York*. In her autobiography, *A Backward Glance* (1934), Mrs. Wharton was to write:

> I have often sighed, in looking back at my childhood, to think how pitiful a provision was made for the life of the imagination behind those uniform brownstone façades, and then have concluded that since, for reasons which escape us, the creative mind thrives best on a reduced diet, I probably had the fare best suited to me. But this is not to say that the average well-to-do New Yorker of my childhood was not starved for a sight of the high gods. Beauty, passion, and danger were automatically excluded from his life (for the men were almost as starved as the women); and the average human being deprived of air from the heights is likely to produce other lives equally starved—which is what happened in old New York, where the tepid sameness of the moral atmosphere resulted in a prolonged immaturity of mind.

It is true that Mrs. Wharton's fiction does feature the theme of the young woman's ordeal in landing a suitable New York husband, and there do recur, throughout her writing career, crucial instances of the superior woman entrapped in marriage to a boring and mindless inferior. These themes—brilliantly developed in *The House of Mirth*, *The Custom of the Country*, and *The Reef*—reflect both the very personal disaster of Edith's marriage to Edward Wharton, the philandering dullard whom she was obliged to divorce in 1912 when he embezzled her inherited trust funds, and the experience of women friends in New York.

But Mrs. Wharton's fiction does not serve very well to buttress the ideology of a feminism engaged in an attack on men, their domination and cruelty, on marriage as such, or on the so-called patriarchy. Her satiric focus, particularly in a novel like *The Age of Innocence*, is the insularity of the New York *haut monde* from those enlightened ideas and attitudes that make for a wholesome society. Though well bred and well educated, New Yorkers of her time had little respect for art or the life of the mind, preferring desultory talk about wines, horses, and stocks rather than conversation about ideas, literature, and art. They had, she makes plain, no "intellectual liberty," "critical independence," civic responsibility, or capacity for breathing the "air of ideas." They had, she laments, "a blind dread of innovation, an instinctive shrinking from responsibility" that prevented them from looking life in the face, as civilized European societies do. As this novel makes plain (through its poignant portrait of her protagonist, Newland Archer), men suffer equally with women from the disappointments, especially in marriage, of such a limited social milieu.

However, as *The Age of Innocence* also makes plain, it is not the men who dictate the constraining forms and terms and conditions of social propriety in New York society; it is the *women*. If May Welland is a bland, colorless, and ignorant wife, it is perhaps no wonder that her husband Newland Archer becomes enchanted with the Europeanized Ellen Olenska, whose vivid intelligence, social style, and unembarrassed sexuality are magnetic. But May Welland, the wife, is the product of the New York female society that has shaped her. Her "innocence" Mrs. Wharton calls an "artificial product," a "factitious purity" that had been "cunningly manufactured by a conspiracy of mothers and aunts and grandmothers and long-dead ancestresses, because it was supposed to be what [Newland] wanted, what he had a right to . . . ." No scene in Mrs. Wharton's work is as decisive as that in *The Age of Innocence* where the Old New York matriarchs conspire to stage a dinner party for Ellen Olenska that in effect expels her from the New York tribe, thereby saving Newland's marriage to May Welland. Nothing can be more poignant than Newland's dawning revelation, in seeing the "guileless" May's eyes "wet with victory,"

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that he has lost Ellen, the woman he passionately loved. Her return to Europe is the sign that the Old New York matriarchs have triumphed. As the Epilogue suggests, it is better so. Although he misses "the flower of life," romantic passion, Archer remains with his wife, discharges his marital and paternal responsibilities, and lives a decent life. (For most sentimental readers, for whom even a transient sexual passion is the *summum bonum*, Archer pays too high a price. Mrs. Wharton didn't think so.)

So interested was Edith Wharton in the intellectual society of men (Henry James and Egerton Winthrop, Percy Lubbock and Walter Berry, *et al.*), and so incisive was her satire on women, at least at times, that Janet Malcolm wrongly concluded in a *New Yorker* piece that Mrs. Wharton hated women. In fact she did not, although she did see how women like her mother, her cousins, and aunts had abused their social power. Nor did she hate men, or attribute to them, as a sex, the stresses that make life difficult for women, although she satirizes them as well. Edith Wharton had something of the true artist's androgynous sensibility, which led her to take pleasure in and repeat a remark once made of her—that she was a "self-made man." Many who knew Edith Wharton commented on her breadth of learning beyond the capacity or endowment of most women, her almost "masculine" intelligence, and her vivid wit. In fact, her friend Henry James, in *Notes on Novelists* (1914), pointedly celebrated the way in which, in her fiction, "the masculine conclusion" so tended to "crown the feminine observation." (This remark led some enemy of *both* writers to call Edith a "male Henry James.") The new *Letters* make plain her consciousness of the coexistence, in her, of masculine and feminine powers. "I conceive my subjects like a man—that is, rather more architectonically & dramatically than most women—then execute them like a woman," so as to provide "the small incidental effects that women have always excelled in, the episodical characterization, I mean."

Mrs. Wharton was no enemy of men or of what is now routinely called the patriarchy. Nor was she an enemy of social conventions as such. She did deplore the mindless observance of conventions that had lost their animating social vitality and were empty husks of once-living cultural meanings. She saw conventions as the product of evolution and hence subject to slow alteration. For that reason she frequently gives us strong, independent heroines who triumph over the power of deadened social forms. Edith Wharton herself was the living example of this power. Her life and her art are testaments to how the limitations of time and place can be transcended, and her victories were celebrated in strong and independent heroines.

This is not to suggest that she did not value the socially cohesive value of tradition and continuity, especially in social relations. She understood the centrality of the family, its manners and mores, and the chaos that ensues when the old established customs that bind a society together begin to disintegrate. She had nothing but contempt for the self-aggrandizement of individuals, for the hedonism of the Twenties, for women (or men) who put self-actualization before all else. Someone has remarked that, although she herself was divorced, no one has treated divorcées in fiction more punitively. That is doubtless true, because divorce cut at the root of the living tree of familial and social interconnectedness. "Ah, the poverty, the miserable poverty," she once told her friend Charles Du Bos, "of any love that lies outside of marriage, of any love that is not a living together, a sharing of all!"

Perhaps the fullest articulation of Mrs. Wharton's social views may be found in *French Ways and Their Meaning* (1919), published first as articles between 1916 and 1918 in American periodicals. This work of social analysis, written during World War I, was meant to explain to Americans the French national ideal and the necessity of saving France from the German onslaught. This national ideal was comprised of four principal qualities, which she listed as

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Reverence, Taste, Intellectual Honesty, and Continuity. Some consideration of these qualities will make plain the basis of her satire on Old New York and on the trivialities of the modern age that had succeeded it. They are cautionary, I suggest, for any feminist revisionism of her work.

By Reverence, Mrs. Wharton meant the deeply rooted respect in France for old customs, traditions, rituals, and taboos—"les bienséances," "the always-have-beens," what she called "the successive superpositions of experience that time brings." She noted the "reflex of negation, of rejection, at the very root of the French Character: an instinctive recoil from the new, the untasted, the untested, like the retracting of an insect's feelers at contact with an unfamiliar object." She saw a deep-seated wisdom in the reverence of the French for old ways, because "whatever survives the close filtering of time is likely to answer to some deep racial need, moral or aesthetic."

By Taste, Mrs. Wharton meant "the regulating principle of all art, of the art of dress and of manners, and of living in general, as well as of sculpture or music." She found the French to be possessed of a kind of natural taste which had developed over generations, infusing itself into their attitude toward language, education, the theater, architecture, the shape of cities, the arts, and so on.

By Intellectual Honesty, she meant the tendency in Frenchmen to accept things for what they are: their acceptance of the facts of life, for example, from which Anglo-Saxons seem to avert their eyes; their frank pleasure in the sensual joys of life; their Rabelaisian humor; their ability to see life steadily and see it whole, as opposed to the "American need" to see reality through rose-colored spectacles; their high esteem for art and ideas, for culture; and their recognition that whatever is worth having requires time, energy, and hard work.

By Continuity, Mrs. Wharton meant "the most homogeneous and uninterrupted culture" in the world, extending backward into prehistory. Unlike Americans, who have broken with the past, the French, she remarked, have slowly and steadily evolved, during the centuries, a set of values marked by prudence, thrift, economy, a maturity based on the weight of the race's moral experience, and a mature sense of the value of tradition and the strength of continuity. "In all this," Mrs. Wharton wrote, "France has a lesson to teach [America] and a warning to give. It was our English forebears who taught us to flout tradition and break away from their own great inheritance; France may teach us that, side by side with the qualities of enterprise and innovation that English blood has put in us, we should cultivate the sense of continuity, that 'sense of the past' which enriches the present and binds us up with the world's great stabilising traditions of art and poetry and knowledge."

Of course it may be said that the French regularly violate, with cavalier abandon, every one of these qualities and that, as sociological analysis, her attribution to the French of these national virtues merely projects onto them values they do not fully exhibit. Having read a great deal about the savagery of the French Revolution and the Reign of Terror in this bicentennial year, I have no quarrel about that. (And we must remember the wartime context in which her articles were written, and her passionate desire for America to save France from the Huns.) But the point is that these are the principles that *she* held most dear. They constitute a deliberative affirmation of conservative values, yet she was properly attentive to how enterprise and innovation may enrich the received tradition, the continuity of which, she was confident, answered deep human needs.

This social conservatism in Mrs. Wharton makes her a doubtful ally of feminists who wish to substitute for the traditional form of man-woman relationships a new social order based on the views of Betty Friedan, Bella Abzug, and the editors of *Ms.* magazine. Theirs are of course not new ideas but have their origin in the radical socialist

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egalitarianism of the Enlightenment and in the Marxist extrapolation. (This much has been conceded by feminist theoreticians: Toril Moi, in *Sexual/Textual Politics*, openly concedes that "the principal objective of feminist criticism has always been political"; and Elaine Showalter confesses that the "theoretical affiliations" of feminism are with "Marxist sociology and aesthetics.") What would Mrs. Wharton have thought of the feminist appropriation of her fiction for the purposes of a sexual revolution?

It is worth remembering that Mrs. Wharton explored the utility of radical egalitarian ideas in *The Valley of Decision* (1902), a long historical novel devoted to the impact of the *philosophes* on the Duke of Pianura, in Italy, in the late eighteenth century. As a young man, he had embraced equalitarian notions from Fulvia Vivaldi, a radical with whom he fell in love, and from her band of underground conspirators. Once in power he undertakes to obliterate the social arrangements by which Pianura's life has been organized for centuries, thus arousing the wrath of the Church, the aristocracy, and the bourgeoisie, as well as the peasantry, who are condemned to starve in the social chaos that ensues. In implementing his radical ideas, Duke Odo precipitates a civil war in which Fulvia is assassinated, the duchy disintegrates, and he is exiled at the approach of a conquering Napoleon. Mrs. Wharton's portrait of the horrors created by the arbitrary imposition of the noble but abstract ideas of liberty, equality, and fraternity on an actual society composed of complex interacting interests is ghastly; but it is no less so than the actual historical record of the Terror, on which her novel was based. In a sequel which she never finished, to be called *The New Day*, she described the counter-revolution that followed, in which the last case proved to be worse than the original conditions in Pianura.

For Mrs. Wharton, any needed social change had to come about by a gradual orderly process, based on recognition of the traditional rights of all of the classes involved, in the light of the conventional duties and responsibilities socially required of each sex; and it had to be based on a shrewd foresight of the consequences of any action taken to alter the balance of interests that constitutes a living society. These ideas are acutely understood and properly formulated in R. W. B. Lewis's biography of the woman. He accurately grasped that she had nothing but contempt for the notion that a utopia of perfect sexual or political equality could be established by intellection in a coffee house or a consciousness-raising session at *Ms.* In one of the new letters in the Lewises' edition, Mrs. Wharton, in the 1930s, tells the Marxist Upton Sinclair that while his portrait of the plutocrat millionaires in *Oil*

> is enough to justify any thoughtful man in the desire to make some radical change in the organization of society, I believe that a wider experience would have shown you that the evils you rightly satirize will be replaced by others more harmful to any sort of civilized living when your hero and his friends have had their way.

I suspect she would have taken a similar stance in regard to the feminist ambition to make over our society in a female image. But I do not expect her fundamental conservatism to deter our feminist literary critics from making her fiction out to be an attack on the social order as it has come down to us, men and all. In the meantime, we will have to await *Mysteries of Paris* and *Edith Wharton's Formative Years* to see whether Edith, and we, are really freed from what Ms. Mainwaring has called "the erroneous context of the official biography" and "the official biographical mould."

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American quartet music, old and new

by Samuel Lipman

I heard a remarkable new piece of chamber music this past January. The work, the String Quartet no. 4 (1988) by the thirty-seven-year-old composer George Tsontakis, was performed in its world premiere by the American String Quartet at New York's 92nd Street YM-YWHA. By its excellence it not only buoyed my often drooping musical spirits; it also prompted in me some thoughts on the general subject of American quartet music, both old and new.

The composers of American classical music may be pardoned for wondering whether a facetious deity has placed them in an environment rewarding in every way save the most important: that of feeling—somewhere, somehow—that what they have composed has been listened to and not just heard, and that there is at least a chance of their work living on in the collective memory.

Americans have long been a musical people. Occasions spiritual and secular, individual and social, private and public, have always been accompanied by music-making and music-listening. Classical music, that infinitely noble but always quixotic genre, has ever been a preoccupation of our middle and upper classes, and even of significant sections of our "masses." An *American* classical music, not just simply an American *classical* music, has been a goal of our most gifted musicians since at least the middle of the nineteenth century.

Today, as the twentieth century nears its end, America is full of music. But the sound that so permeates our lives, it goes without saying, is not the sound of traditional classical music, though that too is available in hitherto undreamt of abundance. Our sonic environment is riddled by rock and pop, those illegitimate offspring of formerly autochthonous folk cultures and the hypertrophied engines of media exploitation. The welter of sound—heard in large and small spaces and via the earphones of the Walkman generation—threatens to destroy our remaining opportunities for sober reflection and private judgment.

Over the past few decades, through the blessings of digital recording and performance technology, the sound of popular music has been changing to an ever increasing loudness and meanness. This change has been paralleled by a new phenomenon, that of minimalist music, which is based on a combination of simple, consonant chords and the obsessive, deadpan repetition of short motivic and harmonic sequences. I should make clear that this music, not as yet commercially successful (except in its application to television commercials and sitcom background scores), hardly lacks champions. The present vogue of Philip Glass, Steve Reich, and most recently John Adams is often seen as a sign of creative energy and audience approbation. The supposed relocation of musical creativity away from the traditional concert music atmosphere and toward dance spaces, downtown clubs, and the classier rock venues—celebrated by the *New York Times* critic John Rockwell in his

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1982 book, *All American Music*—is hailed by many as the first coming of a truly national music. Supposedly this blessed event is all the more bounteously national, and all the more welcome, for its radical discontinuity, expressed musically in a rejection of thematic development and harmonic movement and programmatically in a rejection of a superannuated European tradition.

This radical discontinuity with the past accords well with the wider rejection so visible on college and university campuses today of what is seen as Eurocentrism. Behind the advocacy of changes in music unquestionably lies the hope of a change in society and politics. Our cultural intellectuals, whatever their opinion of Plato as intellectual nourishment for today's youth, seem committed to his analysis of music as it is expressed in *The Republic*. In the following passage, Socrates (the "I" in the conversation) is instructing his two pupils:

> So Damon tells me, and I can quite believe him;—he says that when modes of music change, the fundamental laws of the State always change with them.
>
> Yes, said Adeimantus; and you may add my suffrage to Damon's and your own.
>
> Then, I said, our guardians must lay the foundation of their fortress in music?
>
> Yes, he said; the lawlessness of which you speak too easily steals in.
>
> Yes, I replied, in the form of amusement; and at first sight it appears harmless.
>
> Why, yes, he said, and there is no harm; were it not that little by little this spirit of licence, finding a home, imperceptibly penetrates into manners and customs; whence, issuing with greater force, it invades contracts between man and man, and from contracts goes on to laws and constitutions, in utter recklessness, ending at last, Socrates, by an overthrow of all rights, private as well as public. [1]

It will immediately be recognized that this very point has been made recently by Allan Bloom in his best-selling *The Closing of the American Mind*. Bloom properly remarks that the rise of the rock culture is accompanied by a corresponding loss of interest in classical music. This ordered and refined product of civilization, one suspects, does not seem "authentic" to the young. Thus, there is little music written today that at once interests the young and can be seen to be a solid part of the classical music tradition.

Part of our problem is that the classical music we still have is felt by us to belong to others despite its universality. In some important public sense, its true owners remain the lands and the peoples that gave this music birth. It may seem odd to talk about Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, and the other masters of our musical tradition as not fully ours but as *belonging* to other peoples and other times. The fact remains, however, that nothing of the past can belong to the present until it has been, in Goethe's word, earned. Surely this was what T. S. Eliot had in mind when he wrote (in "Tradition and the Individual Talent"):

> [W]e shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of [the poet's] work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously . . . . Tradition . . . cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour . . . . No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists . . . . What happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them.

How have we fulfilled this obligation to make what we have received our own? Here the evidence suggests a contradiction between our actual achievements in serious music and the opinion some have of us as a creative society. There can be little doubt,

1 The English translation is by Benjamin Jowett.

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it seems to me, that it is precisely this task of what might be called creative possession which our composers are seen as having failed to accomplish. Sometimes this perception of creative failure is formulated with an exaggerated sense of concern for our cultural well-being, as when the literary critic George Steiner found (in his 1980 essay entitled "Archives of Eden") our past record and our future prospects in serious musical creation negligible. Sometimes a virtue is made of necessity, as when the music critic Henry Pleasants (in his 1969 book *Serious Music and All That Jazz*) found that American popular music in its full variety is our true art. Sometimes, too, Americans are patronizingly seen as an art-less people, as when the magazine editor Lewis Lapham, unlike Steiner and Pleasants an American resident, complacently remarked in 1981:

> The distrust of the arts runs in the American grain. We have tried for two hundred years to improve the country's sensibility, saying to ourselves, "We have money; we have commerce; we have good people—why can't we make art?" Nobody can answer the question, and so, traditionally, the Americans have applied to Europe for poets, painters, dancing masters, violinists, interior decorators, and anybody else who promises to civilize the barbarians.

But matters are hardly so simple. The fact is that over much of this century splendid music has been written in this country. On several occasions, I have written about our achievement and about the general problems of being an American musician.[2] Each time I have done so, I have felt myself in a position of lonely virtue. But this past January, sitting in the 92nd Street Y's Kaufmann Concert Hall, I found myself thinking of the extraordinary American achievement in string quartet writing.

A book about American string quartets badly needs doing. I have in mind a genre of composition, originally European, for two violins, viola, and cello, stretching back in an unbroken line to the many works of Haydn and Mozart, continuing with the numerous works of Beethoven, Schubert, and Brahms, and finding twentieth-century expression in the four quartets of Arnold Schoenberg, the six of Bela Bartok, and, most recently, the fifteen of Dmitri Shostakovich. All these quartets, along with relatively isolated works by perhaps another dozen composers, form the backbone of the quartet repertory, and as such are played (except perhaps for the Schoenberg works) all over the world by ensembles famous and unknown alike.

One could hardly hope to give a succinct definition of the musical characteristics of a continuously developing genre now two hundred years old. Any plausible list of features, however, would have to include at least the following: an aesthetic of private rather than public expression; an emphasis on the thematic and motivic interest of the musical material rather than on the effects of instrumental color and virtuosity; a related concentration on structure, development, and variation rather than on the mere alternation of contrasting large statements; and the treatment of each instrument as an independent linear partner rather than as a cog in a harmonic wheel.

Upon re-reading an article I wrote a few years ago largely devoted to the marvelous playing of the old Hollywood Quartet, [3] I now find that, under the influence of my subject, I almost completely ignored American music. Among the many recordings of this group, there appears only one

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2 See, for example, "American Music: the Years of Hope," in *Commentary*, March, 1981; "Music and Musical Life: the Road to Now," in *The New Criterion*, Summer, 1985; "Virgil Thomson's *Lord Byron*," in *Grand Street*, Spring, 1986; and "Doing New Music, Doing American Music," in *The New Criterion*, November, 1987. For a discussion of the relationship between the American and European musical worlds, see "American Music's Place at Home and in the World," in *The Annals*, Winter, 1988.

3 "The Hollywood and Other Quartets," in *Commentary*, February, 1983; reprinted in *The House of Music* (1984).

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American string quartet—an ingratiating and soulful 1936 work by Paul Creston. The story is the same for the revered Budapest Quartet, American by long residence even though European in origin and personnel, and for two currently well-known American groups, the Guarneri and Cleveland quartets. There have been major exceptions, of course. During the more than four decades of its existence, the Juilliard Quartet has rendered yeoman service to American music, and on a less famous level, the now disbanded Concord Quartet made many vital recordings of native works. Today, the Emerson Quartet continues to play, and record, a large amount of American music. But in general the performance of American quartets has been left to little-known performing ensembles. The famous rule our composers have learned to their sorrow still applies: with new American compositions, played once, played nevermore.

Perhaps the most conspicuous quartet on the scene today is the fashionable Kronos Quartet. Punk costumes and all, they are marketed as the Talking Heads of chamber music. Hailed by critics as the solution to the problem of bringing in the young to an art marked increasingly by the playing of old pieces for old people, the Kronos eschews the traditional nineteenth-century classics, as well as almost all the major European works of our own time. The group seems particularly careful to avoid the quartet works of the heroic figures of American music, among them Roy Harris, Walter Piston, Roger Sessions, and William Schuman.

Instead the Kronos concentrates, with few exceptions, on what seem to me rough performances, alternately dreamy and violent, of definitely trivial and often very nasty-sounding music.[4] I do not find any of these performances distinguished either in musical characterization or technical grace. Their records, like their concerts, mix disparate short works by such avant-garde figures as Glass, the American expatriate Conlon Nancarrow, the Australian Peter Sculthorpe, and the Finn Aulis Sallinen, with even shorter works, usually in arrangements, by jazz, pop, and rock figures, including Ornette Coleman, Astor Piazzolla, John Zorn, and Jimi Hendrix. But whichever composer is played, the studied and provocative eclecticism of the Kronos Quartet does no service to the music, especially to the important works they occasionally do manage to play.

As an American quartet, therefore, the Kronos lacks a center in its repertory. Without doubt, this missing center is twentieth-century American music. In orchestral music, such a center comprises the American symphonism of the composers who are ignored by the Kronos and by their polar opposites on the celebrity chamber music circuit. The very term "American symphonism," once so full of pride and hope, is now, I fear, reactionary-sounding. This ignoring of our past eliminates from the orchestral repertory all save a handful of the works of Harris, Piston, Sessions, Schuman, and, of course, Aaron Copland. More important for the subject at hand, it eliminates a large body of chamber music written in the first half of this century, including numerous string quartets.

I have already mentioned the lack of a serious book-length study of American quartets. The most recent book on the string quartet in general is by Paul Griffiths, the chief music critic of the London *Times*.[5] Not surprisingly, it gives little coverage to Americans. Like his fellow English writers, Griffiths is concerned only with our avant-garde and its modernist precursors. Thus, detailed consideration is reserved for Milton Babbitt, John Cage, Elliott Carter, Charles

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4 I know of only four such exceptions. Three of these—the Webern Six Bagatelles op. 9 (1913), the Bartok Quartet no. 3 (1927), and the slow movement (famous, in its orchestral version, as the *Adagio for Strings*) of the Barber String Quartet (1936)—are available on records. The fourth—Elliott Carter's Quartet no. 4 (1986)—can be heard on a broadcast tape.

5 *The String Quartet*, by Paul Griffiths; Thames and Hudson, 1983; paperback, 1985.

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Ives, and George Rochberg.[6] Mainstream American composers such as those I have cited above, however, are confined to meager lists, when they are mentioned at all.

Here I ought to take a stab at defining my use of the word "mainstream" as it applies to American classical music. In negative terms, mainstream means not being mired in academicism—the pedantic use of teachable formulas to produce what are in effect textbook illustrations rather than individual statements; it also means not searching for creative authenticity solely in newness.

In positive terms, mainstream means a use of traditional formal structures from Western music since J. S. Bach; an emphasis on a long, often astringent melodic line; a quality of plaintiveness, referred to by some as a "cowboy" quality and by others as the loneliness of the city; a use of dissonance to express a beauty and sweetness similar to that of consonance; a reliance on widely spaced harmonies, what Virgil Thomson has called "struggle counterpoint"; the inclusion of jazz-inspired but regular rhythmic complications to convey musical interest and human vitality; and, above all, a seriousness of utterance, as if each piece being written were the composer's final act. I keep a special place in my heart, too, for the touching music written at the turn of the century by Americans properly trained in Europe but conscious of living in a young and brash country.

Aesthetic definitions, I know, will differ. I can only claim for mine that, as definitions should, it both excludes and includes. It excludes both the mere imitators of European romanticism and the *provocateurs*. It includes a broad range of music: from George Chadwick and Arthur Foote almost a century ago, through the sadly short-lived Charles Griffes and the experimentalist Henry Cowell, to the unabashed Americanist Aaron Copland, the populist Roy Harris, the severely cerebral Roger Sessions, Harvard's Walter Piston, Yale's Quincy Porter, the arch-Romanticist Howard Hanson, the lushly chromatic Samuel Barber, the quintessential New Yorker William Schuman, the Kansas-born Francophile Virgil Thomson, the post-Bergian opera composer Hugo Weisgall, and even, for much of his career, the vastly complex—indeed overcomplex—Elliott Carter.

Not all of these composers devoted their energies to the writing of string quartets, though with the exception of Weisgall each of them has made some contribution to the medium. I have made a rather more extensive list of important American string quartets than Mr. Griffiths gives in his book. My list is based on my own record and tape collection, and therefore is limited to what has already been recorded or broadcast. Nonetheless, it contains something over fifty pieces by some thirty composers. My list must be supplemented by many works the recordings of which I do not own; more important, it must be supplemented by the other, unrecorded works of already recorded composers. And it is at least arguable that it should be further expanded through the addition of works written on American soil by such European composers as Ernest Bloch, Paul Hindemith, and Darius Milhaud.

In any case it is clear that the American string quartet literature is rich indeed. Perhaps the largest achievement by an American in this genre is Piston's five quartets, written between 1933 and 1962 and now at last available on records in an excellent performance by the Portland String Quartet.[7] Sessions's two very difficult but always rewarding quartets have been recorded, but only the first is currently in print, and that only on a 1945 disc of a live performance. Of Quincy Porter's nine quartets, only four—no. 3, no. 4, no. 7, and no. 8—have been recorded on LP; I have only

6 Tellingly, Rochberg is given serious treatment in the Griffiths book not because of any mainstream position but rather because of his widely discussed reaction against Schoenbergian serialism. This has led him, in several of his recent quartets, to write extended passages in the styles of the great composers of the Romantic and Classical periods.

7 Arabesque 216, 214, and 208.

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been able to obtain the well-played recording of the charming no. 3 by the much-missed Kohon Quartet.[8] None of William Schuman's five quartets is currently available, though no. 3 and no. 4 have been recorded; his most recent quartet—no. 5—was premiered by the Orford Quartet last summer. The performance of this long, demanding, and severely beautiful work at the 92nd Street Y (which I have heard on tape) was one of the few events of lasting value in the 1988 New York International Festival of the Arts.

Even in this very sketchy *tour d'horizon*, I must also mention the haunting Quartet no. 3 (1953) of William Bergsma, the complicated and deeply moving Quartet no. 1 (1942) of Andrew Imbrie, and Harold Shapero's large-scale Quartet no. 1 (1940).[9] The very impressive David Diamond, still prolific today at the age of seventy-three, has written ten quartets, the latest in 1966; of these, I have heard two—no. 3 (1946) and no. 4 (1951)—in beautiful recordings now unfortunately deleted.

As I mention these works, I am conscious of how many of them were written so many years ago. True, Schuman's fifth quartet was written just last year, but he belongs to an earlier generation (Shuman was born in 1910), as does George Perle, born in 1915, who has published two lovely quartets, one in 1960/67 and another in 1973.[10] Like other American music, the American string quartet showed great promise in the 1930s, 1940s, and early 1950s, and then was destroyed by the combined seductions of the French and German postwar avant-garde and electronic technology. The career of the greatly gifted Lukas Foss is the prime example of this destruction.[11]

So for many years now, the field has been given over to the mocking children of the *méchant* Cage, the squeal-and-beep disciples of Babbitt, and the whoosh-and-rattle followers of Ampex and Moog—or, still more recently, to the minimalist purveyors of music-by-the-yard. Is it any wonder that the Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert cycles go on and on?

But fortunately the story may not end on this unhappy note. Perhaps it is still possible for a composer who has been trained and come to maturity during the terrible times through which serious music has gone in the last forty years to write a beautiful string quartet. This is just what I think George Tsontakis has done.

I first became aware of the music of

8 CRI-235. This is as good a place as any to pay tribute not just to the Kohon Quartet (shockingly unlisted, I might add, in the *New Grove Dictionary of American Music*) but to two collections of their American string quartet records, issued in the mid-1970s as budget-priced Vox Boxes and now deleted. These two sets of three LPs contain music by Daniel Gregory Mason, Griffes, Foote, Chadwick, Henry Hadley, Charles Loeffler, Copland, Piston, George Gershwin (the immensely touching 1919 *Lullaby*), Thomson, Schuman, Sessions, Hanson, Peter Mennin, Ives, and Benjamin Franklin (a miserable effort of doubtful attribution!). Many of these works are of great beauty, and the sets are well worth searching out.

9 The Bergsma, Imbrie, and Shapero quartets were all available in the Columbia American Modern Music series of the 1950s. The brainchild of Columbia executive (and composer) Goddard Lieberson and very much overseen by Virgil Thomson and several colleagues, this multi-disc series recorded outstanding works of then-contemporary American music. Many of these records were available during the 1970s on special order; they have all been deleted, though a few are now available on the CRI label.

10 The 1960/67 work is available on Elektra/Nonesuch H-71280, and the 1973 work is on CRI S-387. Mention should be made here of a work of fundamental importance in keeping track of American music on discs: *American Music Recordings: A Discography of 20th-century U.S. Composers* (1988), edited by Carol J. Oja.

11 Convincing proof of what happened to Foss, and by extension what happened to so many of his colleagues, is provided by the recordings of two of Foss's string quartets, no. 1 (1947), and no. 3 (1976). No. 1 (formerly available on Columbia ML-5476 and its successors) is full of melody and beauty, while No. 3 (currently available on CRI-413) is an intolerably sustained essay in rigidity and ugliness.

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Tsontakis at the Aspen Music Festival, where he has been a faculty member since 1976. A student of Sessions and Weisgall, and briefly of avant-gardists Karlheinz Stockhausen and Franco Donatoni in Europe, Tsontakis has taken from his American teachers their traditional musical seriousness and uncompromising artistic integrity. From his European mentors, he has gained an interest in novel instrumental techniques, and (I think) an awareness of the cul-de-sac of postwar musical thought. Of Greek parentage, he is active as the Music Director of the (Greek Orthodox) Cathedral of St. John the Theologian in Tenafly, New Jersey.

I am most familiar with his previous two string quartets (a still earlier work, the Quartet no. 1, has never been performed). The Quartet no. 2 (1983), written for the Emerson Quartet, is a work of seemingly pure fury, stating and restating what strikes me as a composer's rage at a time out of joint. Here are hammered expletives from the strings and *pesante* gruntings, and most of all, an entire slow movement built upon the bare opening notes of the finale of Beethoven's last quartet, the op. 135—to which Beethoven appended the words *Muss es sein?* ("Must it be?"). Tellingly, in his own finale, Tsontakis cannot respond as Beethoven does—with *Es muss sein* ("It must be")—but instead only gets as far as repeated outbursts of two notes conveying better than any words: "It must . . ." But he cannot bring himself to complete the affirmation with the simple "be"; instead the composition ends with repeated expletives that sound like nothing so much as no, no, no.

The Quartet no. 3 (1986), written for the Blair Quartet, is subtitled *Coraggio* ("Courage"). From the beginning it inhabits a more consonant and tonal world than its freely dissonant predecessor. The consonance, one feels, is merely provisional. Ecstatic wisps of melody struggle throughout with extended passages of obsessive, febrile energy, again reminiscent of late Beethoven, in this case the fast movements of the opus 130, op. 131, and op. 132 quartets. It is as if Tsontakis's musical mind was locked into not just Beethoven but also Adrian Leverkühn, the anti-hero composer of Thomas Mann's great novel *Doktor Faustus* (1947). It is a sign of Tsontakis's integrity that, like Leverkühn, he nowhere in his music takes the two easy ways out that are so common in our time—Dadaism or minimalism.

The Quartet no. 4, written for and splendidly played by the American String Quartet at the 92nd Street Y, proclaims from its opening measures that the way out of the musical predicament lies not in insanity, in petty craziness, or what might be called (after a collaborative 1920 work by Erik Satie and Darius Milhaud) "furniture music." The work begins with a simple but rich four-part statement of a Russian Orthodox chorale, and the entire work is a set of variations and transformations of this elemental material. The restless timbral experimentation that had marked Tsontakis's two previous quartets is now gone, subsumed in a fluent and idiomatic instrumental style. There are moments of gaiety, of majesty, and of ecstasy; the wonderfully full harmonic texture moves freely and always naturally between consonance and dissonance, with the chords always serving to support and make clear the melodies in which the work abounds. And with a last, lone B-natural played at the top of the violin's range and at the limits of audibility, the work dissolves in pure song.

With his latest quartet, George Tsontakis has, I think, produced a masterpiece. In itself, it exists at the highest—and rarest—level of contemporary composition. Furthermore, it makes us look again at the entire corpus of American string quartet writing to which it now so clearly belongs. In Eliot's terms, it makes a new sense not only of Tsontakis's earlier works but of American music as a whole. His three quartets must immediately be recorded by the ensembles that gave them birth on the stage, for they give hope that what had seemed impossible is truly possible: beautiful new music can be composed (as it used to be said) from the heart to the heart, even today, and we can begin the urgent process of reclaiming our musical heritage.

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The resurrection of Man Ray

by Deborah Solomon

Man Ray was the ultimate networker. From the time he was twenty-three years old, when he asked Alfred Stieglitz to sit for a painted portrait, he had an uncanny knack for befriending important people. Through Stieglitz he met the collector Walter Arensberg, who introduced him to Marcel Duchamp, who was waiting at the Gare Saint-Lazare when Man Ray first arrived in Paris and who promptly ushered him to the Certà café, where he met the whole Dada crowd. Man Ray got along with everyone. As the years passed, he became known as the one member of the Dada-Surrealist group who never struck up an argument or abruptly broke off a friendship, the only person to win the approval of rivaling ringleaders André Breton and Tristan Tzara. As a member of the movement that specialized in the artful insult, Man Ray was the one who insulted no one.

Man Ray's relation to the tradition of art was every bit as cordial and deferential as his relation to his peers. While he originally started out as a painter, he realized soon after arriving in Paris that he had no chance of competing successfully with the leading talents of the day. And so he graciously stepped out of the ring. Laying down his brushes, at least for a while, he began experimenting with less conventional media—assemblage, photography, filmmaking, polemics, and so on. His various endeavors were all united not by a vision so much as a strategy, one which exploited the psychological and sexual obsessions of Surrealism for surfacey ends. Long-lashed eyes crying tears of glass, disembodied lips hovering absurdly in Paris skies, two pieces of silverware posing as *Mr. Knife and Miss Fork*—these images and objects embrace the spirit of Surrealist revolt while remaining undeniably cheerful.

Central to the Surrealist movement was the notion of the artist as public provocateur, and Man Ray had no trouble fulfilling this role. He could always be counted on to say something shocking, or to show up at a party in an outrageous costume with his latest beautiful girlfriend in tow. Eventually, he came to be regarded as one of the more glamorous figures on the Paris art scene in the fabled years between the two world wars; it's revealing, I think, that he recently became the first artist in living memory to have a Manhattan restaurant named after him.

Man Ray's reputation has never been stronger than it is right now, and it isn't only restaurateurs who would have us see him as the epitome of avant-garde chic. The first biography of him has just been published, and *Self-Portrait*, his own autobiography, has been re-issued in a new, illustrated edition.[1] "Perpetual Motif: The Art of Man Ray" is the name of a large retrospective travelling around the country this year (it was

1 *Man Ray: American Artist*, by Neil Baldwin; Clarkson N. Potter, 449 pages, $25; *Self-Portrait*, by Man Ray; New York Graphic Society, 320 pages, $35.

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organized by the Smithsonian's National Museum of American Art) as well as the six-pound catalogue accompanying the show.[2] These various events have been celebrated in the media with a level of hype exceeding even the usual excess; writers are claiming that Man Ray is not only "the greatest artist America ever produced" (as a critic for *7 Days* put it) but a prophetic figure whose work fully captures the Zeitgeist of the Eighties. This latter claim is true, and it's hard to know whom it reflects worse on—Man Ray or us.

At a time when there are still no full-length biographies of Mondrian, Kandinsky, Braque, or Miró, it seems peculiar that we should now be treated to an exhaustive account of Man Ray's life. Was he really that interesting? To Neil Baldwin, the answer is yes, and his absorbing new biography of the artist is intended as a tribute to the man he perceives as "the quintessential modernist personality."

Baldwin doesn't have much to say about Man Ray's youth. We learn that he was born in Philadelphia in 1890, that his name was Emmanuel Radnitsky, that his father was a hardworking Jewish tailor. He grew up in Brooklyn and became interested in art as a child. By the time we reach page five of the book, Man Ray is already in high school.

Baldwin believes that Man Ray felt a need "to spring free from *personal* history and the traditions of his background." While the author never tells us what history or tradition he might be referring to (or why he uses italics gratuitously throughout the book), there can be little doubt that Man Ray, who changed his name at twenty-one, had only contempt for the poverty and provincialism of the immigrant household in which he was raised. Like many Jews who came of age at the turn of the century, Man Ray resented his outsider status and would spend his life trying to escape it through worldly success. In later life, when American tourists stopped by the Hôtel des Ecoles in Montparnasse in hope of seeing their old acquaintance Manny from Brooklyn, they were invariably met by a short, owl-like man in fine-tailored clothes who claimed to know no such person. As far as Monsieur Man Ray was concerned, Emmanuel Radnitsky had never existed.

Man Ray early on acquired a taste for things French. By the time he was in his teens, he was a regular visitor to Alfred Stieglitz's "291" gallery, where he saw Rodin's drawings and etchings by Matisse virtually the moment they reached these shores. In 1915, when Marcel Duchamp sailed to America, a Dadaist ambassador to the New World, Man Ray immediately befriended him. He became Duchamp's loyal sidekick, accompanying him to the Arensbergs' salons, photographing him as he mugged gamely behind his *Large Glass*, helping him publish *New York Dada*, which, in the tradition of avant-garde periodicals, died after the first issue. The anarchistic ethos of Dada as expressed in Duchamp's snow shovels and fountains provided Man Ray not only with an instant ideology but with the very justification he needed for renouncing everything he found oppressive about his life—his plain, humble parents, his lackluster job in graphic design, his failing marriage to a Belgian émigré. In the freedom of Dada he found an excuse for walking out on his wife, his life.

Man Ray's release from obligation became complete in July 1921, when he sailed for Paris. Unlike Charles Demuth or Marsden Hartley, who also set off for Paris that summer in search of new, enlarged possibilities, Man Ray instantly found his way to the center of the European avant-garde. Four months after his arrival, he exhibited some paintings he had brought from home at the Librairie Six gallery, and

2 "Perpetual Motif: The Art of Man Ray," organized by Merry Foresta of the Smithsonian's National Museum of American Art, will be on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles from March 17 through May 28. From there it will travel to the Menil Collection in Houston (June 30 through September 17) and the Philadelphia Museum of Art (October 14 through January 7, 1990).

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virtually all the Dadaists showed up for the opening. In a letter written soon afterward, Man Ray reported that his Parisian debut had been a success, placing him apart "from the huge mass of daubing that goes on here." Yet none of the paintings sold, and everywhere he looked, Man Ray saw expatriates like himself struggling for recognition. It was at this point that he basically stopped painting and took up photography as his primary medium.

By the beginning of the Thirties, Man Ray had risen to prominence as a vastly successful portrait photographer who was just as much at home in the dusty, cluttered studio of his friend Brancusi as he was in the drawing rooms of international socialites. He was able to command a thousand francs for a sitting, and, as Sylvia Beach put it, "to be done by Man Ray meant you rated as somebody." He earned extra money in the fashion industry; for years he shot spreads for *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar*. Between assignments, he retreated to the solitude of his darkroom to experiment with photographic techniques; the "rayographs" and solarizations that resulted kept him in favor with the Surrealists. He still harbored hopes of gaining recognition as a painter and occasionally turned out a canvas or two.

Man Ray could no more commit himself to one lover than he could to one medium, and much of Baldwin's book is taken up with chronicling the artist's amorous exploits. There was his brief, early marriage to Adon Lacroix, a blonde, willowy Belgian poet. Not long after arriving in Paris, he met Kiki, a celebrated chanteuse whose back he immemorialized in *Violin d'Ingres*. His next paramour was Lee Miller, the American model and photographer. Living in Hollywood in the Forties as a refugee from the war, he met and married Juliet Browner, a striking dancer more than twenty years his junior. Man Ray's love life, like his career, comes across in Baldwin's book as a series of happy, slightly scandalous escapades in which ordinary human concerns, such as having children or growing old, seem oddly beside the point.

Baldwin doesn't seem to care very much about Man Ray's art. In his longest discussion of the artist's oeuvre, the author writes: "No matter what 'instrument' he employed, Man Ray's desire came through—to make the thing in the world seem his own, to possess the object or person and by instinctive action bring it into his work. The stylistic twist always identified it as an effort only one artist could have achieved: himself." Is there any artist of whom this couldn't be said? Every artist possesses the world, but he possesses it in his own way, and Baldwin never says how Man Ray's way was different from anyone else's. He consistently relies on bland, generic statements about self-expression to describe the artist's achievements.

Baldwin fares much better when the subject turns to Man Ray's career, which he handles with intelligence and grace. But he doesn't always analyze his material as carefully as he should. He reports, for instance, that on a nine-day cruise back to Europe after his years in Hollywood, the artist "clacked away on his portable typewriter and knocked off a rough draft of the first four chapters of the memoirs he'd been working on since the late forties." Four chapters in just nine days? That means Man Ray was writing (judging from the finished book) more than fifty pages a day—on a boat! And that's not all. During this same prolific boat ride, "he also composed yet another essay on a subject of perennial concern to him: the artist's function in society." It's a claim that stretches credibility, and, like many others in the book, makes one wonder whether Baldwin cares about separating myth from reality. His biography, like Man Ray's own *Self-Portrait*, sometimes reads more like a publicity release than a probing consideration of a life.

This is not to imply that Baldwin's book is simply a rehash of Man Ray's own autobiography, for it does contain much that is news. Of particular interest, I think, is the light it sheds on the artist's ambivalence about photography, which he seems to have perceived as a second-class art form. Man

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Ray himself was notoriously evasive on this subject. In his autobiography, he relates stories of friends who asked him whether he would ever devote himself exclusively to either painting or photography. His answer was that "there is no conflict between the two—why [can't] people accept the idea that one might engage in two activities in a lifetime, alternately or simultaneously?" Yet Baldwin convinces us that Man Ray was essentially a frustrated painter, an artist who turned to photography to earn a living but who never derived real satisfaction from it. During the Forties, when he was living in Hollywood, he started painting on a full-time basis after a twenty-year hiatus, as if physical distance from the formidable painters he had known abroad gave him the confidence to return to his true ambition. But no one paid attention to his late paintings, which bothered him deeply. In 1951, he received a letter from James Thrall Soby, who was organizing a Gris retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art and wanted to know if Man Ray was willing to lend a photo of Gris to the show. Man Ray felt embittered; he confided to friends that he wished the museum would stop seeing him as a mere chronicler of the art scene. He craved recognition for his paintings—even though he had long ago decided that he couldn't devote himself to painting if it meant giving up his fancy car and deluxe apartment. There is, of course, nothing wrong with reneging on one's early dreams; we all try to minimize our losses. But it does make one wonder: is Man Ray really the "quintessential modernist personality" of legend—or just a man who made the most of exceedingly modest gifts?

The Man Ray retrospective, which originated at the National Museum of American Art in Washington, D.C., starts out with a drum roll. No one would ever argue that Man Ray was a great painter, but his early paintings, which were done in the years following the Armory Show, do hold our interest. They consist mostly of figurative images composed of studiously splintered

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planes and colors that owe everything to the Fauves. Man Ray was never much of a draughtsman—his lines are stiff and mechanical—but he did have a gift for pattern and design. There's a crude vividness to his *A.D. MCMXIV* of 1914, in which an army of faceless, blocklike figures marches in rhythmic unison, as if following orders from the generals of Cubism. Man Ray's early paintings are essentially inspired pastiches, the work of a young man star-struck by the art of Paris.

Before long the show branches out to include assemblages, some of which are quite winning. *Obstruction*, which consists of a cluster of wooden coat hangers suspended from the ceiling, is surprisingly intricate and lovely. An unfurled lampshade (*Lampshade*) looks like a form plucked from an Arp as it gently winds its way to the floor. A household iron studded with a row of fourteen nails (the famous *Cadeau*) makes one think of Degas's weary laundresses and how they might have relished the chance to avenge their employers with this wicked object. Man Ray's assemblages come out of the same rakish humor as Duchamp's "readymades," but they don't try to proclaim the futility of making art. Man Ray is Duchamp minus the nihilism.

Man Ray's playfulness carried over into his photographs. He holds the patent on the cameraless "rayograph," in which combs, pipes, and other common objects are placed against photosensitive paper and exposed to light to simulate glowing silhouettes. These works have gone down in the annals of photography as daring new additions to the medium, but their thrill has eroded over time. To be sure, Man Ray brought the techniques of Surrealism into the darkroom, but the images that resulted have more in common with the illustrational Surrealism of Salvador Dali than with the lyrical Surrealism of Arp or Miró. The "rayographs" all feature juxtaposed objects—hotel keys, revolvers, blindfolds, the kind of objects one might find in the home of the Marquis de Sade. They exploit the sadist preoccupations so basic to Surrealism while politely avoiding any hint of menace. Clearly it amused Man Ray to push S&M party props around in dark space. Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, by comparison, used similar cameraless techniques to push form to radical extremes.

It is, of course, as a portrait photographer that Man Ray is best known, and the exhibition in Washington dutifully rounds up the usual subjects. The ardent, young face of Ernest Hemingway gazes serenely into the distance, a dreaming folk hero posed in front of a banjo. Brancusi with his flowing gray beard looks as wise and ancient as Moses. Duchamp is dressed up as Rrose Selavy. Breton appears in profile, stoically displaying his high, noble forehead and classical features. Picasso, as usual, glares defiantly. There are many pictures of glamorous ladies—Lee Miller retreating into rich shadow; Peggy Guggenheim modeling a new Jazz Age dress, one hand on her waist, the other waving what must be the longest cigarette holder in history. And then there's Kiki, who's sitting on a table coyly displaying her white nakedness, her painted lips parted suggestively, her contours as rounded and seemingly boneless as one of Ingres's sylphic nudes. As a whole, Man Ray's portraits are fairly straightforward, but they lean more toward the soft pictorialism of the past than the stark, street-wise candor of his contemporary Brassai or other modern photographers.

There's a certain temptation to see Man Ray as a prototype of Andy Warhol. They shared a fascination with the American dream of fame, and their best-known work consists in large part of celebrity portraits. They both made plotless movies starring their friends. (Warhol, by the way, made a silkscreened portrait of Man Ray in 1975.) Neither artist knew how to draw, except to produce a mechanical line, yet both were tremendously ambitious men who were able to get around their artistic deficiencies on the basis of technical innovation. Whereas Warhol applied the techniques of photography to painting, Man Ray applied the techniques of painting to photography. But the irony is that Man Ray's best photographs

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take their inspiration not from the painting of his own time, but from the conventions of nineteenth-century academic painting. This is particularly the case with his solarized prints, which often show gleaming female nudes entrapped in dark outlines, their flesh compressed into pure form; these works come straight out of Ingres.

The Man Ray show in Washington didn't end so much as it abruptly collapsed about two thirds of the way through. There was a gallery devoted to the artist's paintings from the Thirties, when he was working in a Surrealist style, and it was in this room that we were forced to relinquish any hope we may have had of seeing Man Ray evolve into a mature artist. He never did. *Easel Painting*, of 1938, shows a painting within a painting—a large yellow canvas of a female nude resting on an easel. It's intended as a high-minded joke, but it comes across as a crude cartoon. Whatever feel Man Ray had for paint when he first started out in New York was eventually stifled by his instinct for design; his late paintings never rise above the level of commercial art. His flair as an assemblagist deteriorated, too. The last galleries of the show, which followed Man Ray up until his death in 1976, mercilessly subjected us to one bad joke after another, such as *It's Springtime*, in which a figure made out of heavy metal springs (get it?), flings its arms wide open in corny celebration of the new season.

A key problem with the Man Ray exhibition—and with the artist's career as well—is that it lacks any sense of inner momentum. It doesn't build toward a climax or make you feel you're in the presence of a man with a vision. Instead of depth, we get variety.

The catalogue accompanying the show tries to make the case that variety is enough.[3] It includes essays by seven scholars, each of whom has been assigned to write on a different chapter of the artist's life—his New York years, his Paris years, etc. The strange part is that these various essays end up sounding virtually the same, for they all revolve around the assumption that "Man Ray was dazzling in the multiplicity of his talents," as curator Merry Foresta gushingly puts it. Yes, it's true, Man Ray worked in many media, but does that alone make him dazzling? What did he achieve in these various media? Weren't his paintings totally derivative? Weren't his assemblages just a PG version of Duchamp's X-rated urinals? Weren't his portraits distinguished by little else than the fame of their subjects? Throughout his life, Man Ray embraced the spirit of adventure we tend to associate with high modernism while failing to enact the miracles of form inscribed in the work of so many of his contemporaries. He didn't shape the art of his time so much as it shaped him, and to ignore this fundamental distinction, as the catalogue does, is to fail to come to terms with his achievements.

No exhibition this season has generated more publicity than the Man Ray retrospective. Condé Nast, which for years provided Man Ray with a paycheck, has given him a triple salute—full-length features in *Vanity Fair*, *Vogue*, and *HG*. There have also been articles in *Harper's Bazaar*, *Interview*, *Art & Antiques*, *Smithsonian*, and *Fame*—to mention the few I recently came across in an admittedly haphazard survey of friends' coffee tables. All of these articles appeared before the exhibition even opened, and all, in their own way, seemed oddly eager to proclaim Man Ray as a man for our time. As one writer put it, "when all is said and done, Man Ray . . . may well emerge as the patron saint of the postmodern."

Man Ray's apotheosis as a hero of the Eighties isn't taking place only in the pages of glossy magazines. A one-day symposium held last December at the National Museum in Washington was devoted to the subject of Man Ray's (presumably large) influence on

3 The exhibition catalogue, *Perpetual Motif: The Art of Man Ray*, includes essays by Merry Foresta, Stephen C. Foster, Billy Klüver, Julie Martin, Francis Naumann, Sandra S. Phillips, Roger Shattuck, and Elizabeth Hutton Turner (Abbeville Press, 348 pages, $55).

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contemporary artists. Who, exactly, has he influenced? William Wegman, for one, who came down to Washington to show several short films starring his labrador Man Ray. (The artist told the audience that he originally intended to name his dog Bauhaus—or would that be Bow-haus?—but then changed his mind.) Roberta Smith, an art critic for *The New York Times*, put on a slide show featuring the work of fashionable SoHo artists and linked them one by one to Surrealism. David Salle, she explained, juxtaposes incongruous images. Elizabeth Murray uses biomorphic forms. Ditto for Terry Winters. Jeff Koons tries to "shock" his viewers by elevating common objects into art. After Smith finished her presentation, Walter Hopps, the director of the Menil Collection in Houston, pointed out that Koons's *chotchkes* don't shock anyone but merely reinforce the consumer mentality of the collectors rushing out to buy them.

To be sure, one can find parallels between Salle and Surrealism, but one can also find parallels between a lemon and a golf club; one can find parallels anywhere one wants to. That doesn't mean they're not strained or contrived. The spirit of Surrealism died long ago, even before the Surrealists did, and to exhume its exquisite corpse in the name of Eighties-style revisionism is not much more honest than grave robbery. But perhaps I'm being a little too quick to utter one more requiem for the old avant-garde; how easy it is to lament the absence of adventure or daring in these pinstriped times. The current revival of Man Ray does indeed speak to something embedded in the collective unconscious of the art world, but my own sense is that it doesn't have anything to do with art.

Man Ray's career was eternally divided between art on the one hand and fashion on the other, and at a time when the line between these two worlds is thinner than ever, it's only logical that he should be looked to as a hero. He taught us that you don't have to suffer to make art. You can make money, too. You can go to parties. You can have famous friends. Most important, Man Ray taught us that it's okay to be just minor. He knew he didn't have a chance of achieving much in an age that was far greater than he was, an age so great that artists today are still living in the shadow of its legacy. How can one ever hope to compete with the amazing achievements of modernism? Like so many contemporary artists, Man Ray got around that problem by forsaking any interest in genuine innovation for the slight but sure rewards of cleverness. This represents a triumph of sorts, but a triumph of attitude rather than of imagination, and one wishes his admirers would stop confusing the two.

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I. A. Richards: critic as scientist

by Bruce Bawer

For many of us with an interest in twentieth-century literary criticism, Ivor Armstrong Richards is at once a central and a problematic figure. He was, of course, one of the most influential critics of the modern age, if not *the* most influential. His emphasis on rigor, precision, and the poem-as-object earned him (from some) the impressive sobriquet "father of the New Criticism," while his preoccupation with theory and with the relativity of literary truth reflects more than coincidental—and less than delightful—affinities with the practitioners of deconstruction. As John Paul Russo observes in his exhaustive new study of Richards's life and work, Richards, for better *and* for worse, "led the age of analysis into literary criticism." [1]

Born in Cheshire, England, in 1893, the son of a chemical engineer, Richards was, for all his love of poetry, aware from a tender age of the centrality of science and technology to modern society; yet this centrality, in his view, was not properly reflected in the way literature was talked and written about. As a student at Magdalen College, Cambridge, around the time of the First World War (when recurrent tuberculosis kept him out of uniform), he looked upon the varieties of criticism then in vogue and found them—well, unscientific: in the wake of 1890s Aestheticism, literary critics tended toward post-Paterian impressionism, with its windy appreciation of "Beauty" and "The Grand Style," and toward biographical and historical readings. Richards, for his part, loathed biography and history: he was more interested in the future (and in the part he could play in it) than in the past, more interested in contemplating the forthcoming Age of Science than in examining the ways people had lived and thought in the days before Freud, Einstein, and *Gestalt*.

So it was that, after devoting his freshman year to history courses, Richards turned his back on these studies and proceeded to concentrate on such rapidly advancing disciplines as physiology, chemistry, psychology, and modern philosophy. The influence of his courses in these disciplines—and of his extensive independent reading in related fields over the ensuing years—proved to be profound and lifelong. Though Richards would pass through several phases in his wide-ranging career as author and educator, his guiding article of faith throughout his life seems to have been that the constantly expanding body of scientific knowledge about the nature of man and his world must, of necessity, lead to an increased understanding of the nature of the experience of language and literature, and consequently to an improvement in man's understanding of himself. Like H. G. Wells, Richards was at once practical and idealistic, knowledgeable about science's accomplishments but encumbered by a misguided faith in its

1 *I. A. Richards: His Life and Work*, by John Paul Russo; Johns Hopkins University Press, 832 pages, $39.95.

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potential ability to unlock the mysteries of human character and feeling.

Nevertheless, Richards's contribution to literary criticism is extraordinary. It was he who introduced such terms as *tone* and *speaker* to the discussion of poetry, and who first named the two elements of a metaphor the tenor and the vehicle. He helped teach critics to approach a poem not as the direct expression of a poet's feeling (which, of course, it often is, but which it sometimes is not) but as a "dramatic" or a "semi-dramatic" utterance. In his most important books—*Principles of Literary Criticism* (1925), *Science and Poetry* (1926), and *Practical Criticism* (1929)—he raised fundamental but widely neglected questions about the nature of the literary experience, forcing professional and amateur readers alike to think long and hard about what actually happened when they read a piece of writing. At its best, Richards's work has wit, energy, and an impressive sense of conviction and purpose; if Ezra Pound reminded modern readers that poetry should be as well written as prose, Richards (like Eliot) reminded them that literary criticism should be as serious and disciplined as scientific discourse.

At its worst, however, Richards's work is deeply frustrating—by turns self-evident and incomprehensible, imprecise and tautological, pointless and pretentious. One might hesitate to speak so harshly about Richards's criticism, except that he was himself so thoroughly dismissive of the critics who had preceded him, and so outspoken about the unqualified superiority of his own approach. I quote from the celebrated opening pages of *Principles of Literary Criticism*:

> The questions which the critic seeks to answer, intricate though they are, do not seem to be extraordinarily difficult. What gives the experience of reading a certain poem its value? How is this experience better than another? . . . But if we now turn to consider what are the results yielded by the best minds pondering these questions in the light of the eminently accessible experiences provided by the Arts, we discover an almost empty garner. A few conjectures, a supply of admonitions, many acute isolated observations, some brilliant guesses, much oratory and applied poetry, inexhaustible confusion, a sufficiency of dogma, no small stock of prejudices, whimsies and crochets, a profusion of mysticism, a little genuine speculation, sundry stray inspirations, pregnant hints and random *aperçus*; of such as these, it may be said without exaggeration, is extant critical theory composed.

Richards proceeds to list famous slogans from Aristotle, Horace, Dryden, Carlyle, and other critics through the ages. For instance: "All men naturally receive pleasure from imitation." "The spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling." "A criticism of Life." "Significant form." Richards's comment on these snippets: "Such are the pinnacles, the *apices* of critical theory, the heights gained in the past by the best thinkers in their attempt to reach explanations of the value of the arts. Some of them, many of them indeed, are profitable starting-points for reflection, but neither together, nor singly, nor in any combination do they give what is required."

The implication here, naturally, is that Richards *does* do what is required, that he does explain, once and for all, the value of the arts. Yet neither *Principles of Literary Criticism* nor any of its successors contains an explanation better than Wordsworth's or Arnold's. To read through his criticism is to gain the distinct impression that he specializes not in explanations of artistic value but in precise, categorical pronouncements about matters that simply do not lend themselves to precise categories. Indeed, generations of readers have legitimately questioned whether most of what Richards wrote can be classified as literary criticism at all. The majority of his writings—especially those of his middle and later years (he died in 1979)—are concerned less with literature than with language, and with the promulgation of hypotheses that are as applicable to laundry lists as to poetry. Discussions of

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specific literary works form a surprisingly tiny part of his oeuvre. As Russo notes, "Richards believed that theory is for books, and practical analysis of texts for the lecture hall." What is perhaps most remarkable about Richards's career is how small a part literature actually played in shaping his theories, and how deeply indebted he was, by contrast, to the teachers of his undergraduate science courses and to a few scientific journals. Scientific concepts, more than literary insights, lie at the core of his work; those concepts lend, as Russo observes, "an air of precision and objectivity to his proceedings."

All too often, however, that is all they do lend to Richards's work—an *air* of precision and objectivity. For although Richards readily admits that science "can tell us nothing about the nature of things in any *ultimate* sense," he nonetheless often behaves as if the introduction of scientific terms, graphs, charts, and analogies to discussions of literature automatically lends such discussions greater validity. He creates neat categories, for instance, where no one before him had ever thought in terms of categories. Among his inventions in this line are the three types of imagery ("typographical," "tied," and "free"), the three varieties of sentimentality, and the five (sometimes seven) kinds of work that language performs. (This way of thinking strongly influenced many of Richards's followers, most famously his student William Empson, who in 1930, at the tender age of twenty-three, published the classic *Seven Types of Ambiguity*.) From the physicist Neils Bohr, Richards borrowed the principle of "complementarity," which embodied Bohr's recognition that the results of scientific investigation are necessarily distorted by the properties of the investigative apparatus; Richards makes use of the word to describe the relativity of literature. "Speakers and readers," Russo explains, "are in a complementary situation with a text, and so are the words on the page with one another; the total context is always provoking new shades of meaning and definition."

Perhaps Richards's most well-known coinage is the word *pseudo-statement*, which he defines as "a form of words which is justified entirely by its effect in releasing or organizing our impulses and attitudes (due regard being had for the better or worse organizations of these *inter se*); a statement, on the other hand, is justified by its truth, *i.e.*, its correspondence, in a highly technical sense, with the fact to which it points." A work of non-fiction makes statements; a work of literature makes pseudo-statements. Thus Dante's Christianity, say, does not represent an actual expression of belief with which an agnostic reader must come to terms, but a "pseudo-belief" which should pose no problem at all.

For many readers, of course, the very idea of pseudo-statements and pseudo-beliefs poses a considerable problem. For though it is worthwhile to heed Richards's reminder that opinions, ideas, and beliefs enter a work of literature in a distinctly different manner than they do a work of non-fiction prose, the important thing is that they *do* enter, and that to appreciate the work of a writer (however great) whose beliefs strongly inform his work can be a very complex matter for a reader who does not share those beliefs. After all, to read a serious novel or poem is to confront, in some form and to some degree, another person's soul; if the fundamental assumptions of such a soul prove to be utterly different from one's own, a genuine assimilation of the work of art must necessarily become more difficult; a reader who does not find the process to be seriously complicated by such circumstances can only be failing to experience literature on a human level. And, in fact, one of the most unpleasant long-term consequences of Richards's critical theories (though one would hardly attribute this development entirely to Richards's influence) has been the proliferation of academic critics who plainly *don't* experience literature on a human level—who regard any sincere expression of strong emotion in literature as sentimentality and who consider true literature to be an entirely intellectual activity, a form of high-level wordplay.

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And at times it seems as if wordplay is what Richards is all about. Just as he borrowed the word *complementarity* from Bohr, so Richards, dissatisfied by the vagueness of such words as *beauty* and *pleasure*, contrived a crude model of human aesthetic response based on C. S. Sherrington's 1906 study *The Integrative Action of the Nervous System*, and thereby redefined the abstractions of turn-of-the-century criticism in terms of the abstractions of turn-of-the-century neurology. The model, to put it simply, enabled Richards to "explain" beauty and pleasure—and even such moral concepts as good and evil—as consequences of the effective organization of impulses. "For Richards," Russo writes, "the distinction between good and evil is the difference between 'free' and 'wasteful' organization, between 'fullness' and 'narrowness' of life." Thus, "by a good experience we mean one in which the impulses which make it are fulfilled and successful, adding as the necessary qualification that their exercise and satisfaction shall not interfere in any way with more important impulses."

Of course, to speak of an impulse as "fulfilled and successful" has no neurological meaning, and therefore such an "explanation" does not really explain anything; all it does is replace a relatively comprehensible abstraction with a relatively incomprehensible one. Perhaps such concepts as good and evil do all come down to neurology, in the end, but Richards's formulations are so scientifically primitive as to be worthless. To define "unfair or aggressive behavior," as he does, by saying that it leads "to a form of organisation which deprives the person so organised of whole ranges of important values" is to say nothing at all; at best it is meaningless, at worst misleading. As John Crowe Ransom observed in his 1941 essay "Criticism as Pure Speculation," Richards's "was an esoteric poetic . . . much too unrelated to the public sense of a poetic experience," which "very nearly severed the dependence of poetic effect upon any standard of objective knowledge or belief."

How is one to explain Richards's seeming compulsion to explain such things as aesthetic value and moral virtue in terms of neurological organization? Reading Richards's chief critical texts, one cannot help feeling that he was, quite simply, more comfortable with neurological mysteries than with moral and aesthetic ones. In any event, eager though he was to distinguish sharply between the ways that language works in science and in poetry, Richards patently felt that bringing the language and thought processes of science into literary criticism was essential in order to keep literature (especially poetry) and the serious discussion thereof vital and relevant in the twentieth century—in order to "bridge the chasm," as Russo puts it, "between science and art."

Yet surely the only hope of poetry in the modern age lies in leaving that chasm unbridged, in not confusing art with science and technology. This is not to deny that the careful internal analysis of a poem, in the manner of the New Critics, is the most sensible of all critical approaches to poetry; it is merely to deny that such analysis represents a bridging of the chasm between science and poetry, to deny that there is anything about the New Criticism that makes it especially suitable to an age of science, and to deny that there is a good reason for Richards to depend as heavily as he does upon scientific terminology. What is most urgently required of a first-rate literary critic is not an acquaintance with the argot of science, or with the latest issue of *Scientific American*, but a deep sensitivity to language and feeling, a mature understanding of human character, a sense of style, and (as Eliot said) intelligence. And the fact, alas, is that more than a few of Richards's works betray surprising deficiencies in all but the last of these categories.

If Richards was inordinately fascinated by the latest achievements of science, and irresistibly tempted to incorporate them into his theory of criticism, it is because, as I have suggested, he was a believer—like Bernard Shaw, a prolific, iconoclastic, and sometimes

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rather starry-eyed believer—in the power of new ideas, during an age of science, to improve the lot of humankind. It was not only in the field of literary criticism that this quality of character manifested itself; another outgrowth of this tendency was his decades-long championing of Basic English, a simplified version of English which was invented by his friend and collaborator C. K. Ogden (*Foundations of Aesthetics*, *The Meaning of Meaning*) in the late 1920s to help in teaching English to foreigners, and which thrived between the two world wars. During his middle and later years, Richards spent an extraordinary amount of time (notably in China) teaching Basic English and propagandizing for its universal use. In the service of this cause he wrote *Basic English and Its Uses*, *Basic in Teaching*, and *How to Read a Page*; collaborated on books called *First Steps in Reading English* and *English through Pictures*; helped organized Basic English courses on three continents; and even translated Plato and Homer into Basic. Yet Basic—thanks, perhaps, to the widespread perception that it constituted an attempt to "dumb-down" the language—failed to have the staying power Richards hoped it would. (Which may have been for the best, for if the experience of education over the past few decades has taught us anything, it is that simplifying the material to be learned is not the best means of improving pedagogy in language, in literature, or in anything else.)

As innovative as Basic English was Richards's book *Practical Criticism*, the record of a notorious experiment in which he gave his Cambridge students the unsigned texts of various great and terrible poems and asked for their evaluations; the results were that such poets as Donne and Hopkins received a surprising amount of abuse while the work of various meretricious hacks was widely praised. (The book's title was taken from a phrase used in *Biographia Literaria* by Coleridge—whose critical theory, by the way, Richards treated at length in his 1935 study *Coleridge on Imagination*.) So impressed was Richards by the results of his experiment, by the insights they provided into the highly misguided assumptions and questionable standards of taste that guided his students' reading, and by the applicability of those insights to his teaching, that in later years he extended the method of *Practical Criticism* into other disciplines. (In a Cambridge course on "English Moralists," for instance, he asked his students to comment on unsigned passages from Hume, Mill, and Mussolini.) Though its reputation, in certain circles, is greatly out of proportion to its actual significance, *Practical Criticism* may well be Richards's most enduring achievement, a cleverly conceived, highly engaging, and truly useful application of his singular talents.

Like Shaw, Richards fiddled with typography, experimenting in his late books with capitalization, italics, and a set of quirky punctuation marks that he called (in an unfortunate employment of decon lingo) "meta-semantic markers." He was, in Russo's words, "dazzled by the media," seeing television as a potentially powerful tool for language education, a subject about which he wrote a book entitled *Design for Escape: World Education through Modern Media*. (He also used the word *media* in another—awful—book title, *Poetries: Their Media and Ends*.) In his later years, he published several volumes of unorthodox plays and of taut, eccentric, largely rhymed poetry (remarkably, he wrote his first poem at age fifty-nine), and collected these decidedly minor works in *Internal Colloquies* (1971); in his last book, *Beyond* (1974), which Richards identified as "my final thing, in any large way," the nearly eighty-year-old critic contrived a singular document which Russo describes as "a series of studies on the dialogues between human figures and their gods."

Though these products of Richards's declining years testify to the Shavian breadth of his creative interests—and though some of the poems earned the admiration of no less an authority than Robert Lowell—Richards's late books attracted surprisingly

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little attention at the time of their publication, and have failed in the intervening years to win an audience. The truth is that by the time Richards got around to writing verse and drama, his contribution to the world of letters was long since completed. A volume of memoirs would have been of interest, but Richards's antipathy toward biography prevented him from even contemplating such a book.

Which brings us to the paradox of sorts that is *I. A. Richards: His Life and Work*. What can one say about a more than eight-hundred-page biography of a critic who hated biography, and whose very fame rests in large part upon his vigorous objection to excessive critical probing into the lives of authors? Well, to begin with, Russo's book shares many of Richards's own virtues: it is extremely comprehensive and thoughtful, offering a remarkably thorough account of its subject's writing and ideas. There seems hardly to be a single essay in Richards's huge oeuvre that does not receive detailed treatment; indeed, Russo offers astonishingly full discussions not only of Richards's work but of many of Richards's undergraduate teachers, major intellectual contemporaries, and collaborators. Russo's attitude toward his subject, moreover, seems mostly fair and evenhanded.

There are times, though, when Russo, even as he acknowledges certain deficiencies in Richards's criticism, strains to make Richards's ideas sound more logical or attractive than they do in Richards's own language. In the manner of a script doctor seeking to improve an ailing Broadway play, for instance, Russo describes at one point how Richards's theory of value might be "rescued" from Richards's own incomplete and unclear presentation of it and "reconstituted" in more cogent fashion. Likewise, on another occasion he tries to make Richards's ideas about pseudo-belief sound more palatable:

> In a conversation in 1956 reported by Stephen Spender . . . Richards said that "what the poet believed inside his poetry, need have no—indeed must have no—authoritatively rational connection dictated by outside belief: 'The curious thing about poetry is that anything can happen inside its peculiar world without commitment to what goes on outside.'" This sounds like doctrinaire formalism . . . . But one notes in "authoritatively" a warning against authoritarian demands on a poet or poem. The fact that "anything can happen" in the test-chamber of poetry is a charter of freedom. The overall intensity of the experience requires the shutting down, for the moment, of external and internal pressures.

Perhaps the most surprising problem with this biography of Richards, however, is that it is not really a biography. Yes, it is chronologically organized and contains the essential personal data—place of birth, ancestry, education, marriage. But these materials feel tacked on, as if Russo had first written a dissertation-style critical study and had then been persuaded by his editors to interpolate a few biographical facts so that the book could be marketed as a biography. On occasion, the matter-of-fact haste with which Russo gets the necessary biographical tidbits out of the way is well-nigh breathtaking:

> In the Welsh mountains, in 1917, Richards was introduced to his future wife, Dorothy Eleanor Pilley. She was born on 16 September 1894 in Camberwell, London, the eldest daughter of John James Pilley, a science lecturer and manufacturer of baby foods, and Annie Maria Young. She attended Queenswood, Eastbourne, and was sent to finishing schools in Paris and Hanover. When she met Richards, she was a budding journalist and had taken up rock-climbing. It is fitting that they should have met in the mountains, because it was their lifelong pastime. Pilley became one of the great sportswomen in the history of British mountaineering.

So much for Richards's spouse, to whom he would remain married for the rest of his life. While it is interesting to know where Mrs. Richards went to finishing school, Russo

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doesn't even touch on the more important questions about her. We never get a sense, for instance, of what Richards's marriage was like, of what influence (if any) his wife had on the development of his ideas or on the course of his career. Why should she be mentioned at all, in such a book, unless Russo can manage, by describing the mind and character of the woman with whom Richards chose to spend his life, to illuminate Richards's own mind and character?

So it goes. Whether Russo is writing about Richards's marriage or his friendships or his relations with colleagues, the human dimension seems missing, its place taken by a cut-and-dried influence study. While many of Russo's observations are undoubtedly valid, the question that a biographer must ask is why Richards allowed himself to be influenced, say, by this teacher and not that one, by one colleague and not another. The answers to such questions must be more complex and subjective ones than Russo typically provides; Russo, who is more interested in expostulating upon the nuts and bolts of literary theory than in probing the ambiguities of human character, seems not to understand this. Though he presents, then, a wealth of material about the critical and philosophical milieu in which Richards's ideas matured, he fails utterly to conjure up a vivid image of the young man who moved through this rich milieu and whose mind took shape in a singular way.

In his references to the New Critics, meanwhile, Russo is often somewhat condescending and sardonic, depicting Ransom, Tate, Brooks, Warren, and company as (to put it bluntly) a pack of ingrates who borrowed Richards's critical theories without proper acknowledgement, who applied those theories in their celebrated works of close analysis, and who then attacked Richards for those same theories. Russo reminds us, for instance, of Allen Tate's complaint that poetry "is not only quite different from science but in its essence is opposed to science"; and he recalls Cleanth Brooks's remarks about the "nonhuman order" and "simplification" of science, as well as Brooks's hopeful observation that "the growing self-doubt of science and the questioning of the belief in historical progress signaled a cultural situation more favorable to tragic complexities." In such expressions of difference with Richards, Russo discerns nothing less than filial betrayal: "Science had provided Richards with a large fund of ideas, many of which he transmuted and made useful for the New Critics. Now it was cast aside." The simple fact, of course, is that the New Critics, though practicing a type of literary analysis that owed much to Richards's critical theories, disagreed deeply—and, I feel, rightly—with his principal ideas about science and poetry; as critics, it was incumbent upon them to discuss these differences as straightforwardly as possible. What Russo sees as betrayal is nothing more, really, than a healthy and productive independence of mind.

Why does Russo prefer Richards to the New Critics? One reason is manifestly political. Russo contrasts Richards's politics favorably with those of Richards's contemporaries; Richards, he reminds us, "did not adopt the nostalgic agrarian conservatism or verbal mysticism of the American New Critics" or "retreat behind a reactionary orthodoxy like Eliot in the 1930s" or, "like Ezra Pound, embrace an organicist and totalitarian myth through the instruments of modern technology." Interestingly, one of Russo's few strongly stated criticisms of Richards is that "his social criticism lacks the well-defined categories, relentless logical consecutiveness, and Marxist bite of Adorno's and Horkheimer's." (Love that Marxist bite!) There are points in the book where Russo seems to be employing such Marxist critics as Adorno, Eagleton, and Raymond Williams as touchstones of excellence, remarking, for instance, that "any reappraisal of Richards on belief and sincerity should take into account Theodor Adorno's Hegelian-Marxist critique of inwardness and authenticity."

But Russo's tendency to give occasional

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free publicity to Marxist critics is hardly his book's most lamentable weakness. The main problem, I think, is that Russo is hampered by the same failing that most seriously marred Richards's criticism: namely, a certain inclination to reduce the richly, complexly, mysteriously human to the programmatic, the measurable, the scientific. Yet it would perhaps be unfair to dismiss Richards with such words. He does not, to be sure, stand up well to comparison with most of the New Critics, who refined his critical theories, cleansed them of their more egregious elements—in particular, the borrowings from neurology and the like—and, most importantly, put those theories into practice. (It is, indeed, the magnificent close readings by such critics as Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren that make their criticism feel vibrant and relevant today in a way that Richards's criticism, with its emphasis on pure theory and scientific analogy, does not.) But if one is cataloguing the differences between Richards and the New Critics, it is only fair to point out as well the dramatic and telling divergences between Richards and the deconstructionists. Whereas the deconstructionists tend to manifest a glib and expedient fealty to the notion of art's disconnection from life, Richards's work reflects a sincere and urgent sense of engagement with the question of art's relation to life; whereas the deconstructionists subscribe to the fashionable position that writing is ultimately meaningless, Richards testifies time and again to the innate significance of language; and whereas the deconstructionists seem to conceive of the critic as an academic speaking to academics, Richards sees himself, like Wordsworth, as a man speaking to men. In these ways, certainly, his is a legacy more than deserving of respect.

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Poems *by Patricia Hooper, Floyd Skloot & Alfred Dorn*

Wearing my son's shirt

Looking for something to wear
in the garden, I put on
my son's oversized shirt. I feel
like a soul trying on a body.

This one's too large, but I like
the coolness of breezes under
my collar and cuffs. I like
believing that I can expand

in any direction. Just now
I was billowing, buoyant, a flag
flapping over the melons. I thought
birds' wings, but it was the shirt

trailing in parsley. I feel
like my son must, coming out
on the porch, seeing someone wearing
his shirt, unsure who I am.

—*Patricia Hooper*

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Still life without father

The reading lamp beside his easy chair
is lit, its tassels wreathed by cigar smoke
rising from an abalone shell. Poised there
like whitecaps, waves of paper wrappers poke
from their empty box of butterscotch cremes.
The latest *Life* is spread like a doily
across the soiled chairback where his head seems
to have been.
Shut drapes suggest it may
be winter, although there is no steaming glass
of Lipton tea, no black cardigan, no
plaid covered flask of brandy.
Time will pass
without changing the life these objects show,
caught between a time his memory sits
within and a shape his lost image fits.

—*Floyd Skloot*

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The bow

In the attic, behind gray metal
filing cabinets crammed with defunct
warranties and cancelled checks,
I found the recurved lemonwood
bow I bought the year I met
my wife. Its leather finger
and forearm guards still hung
on a nock. The bowstring looped
through dust and the quiver
folded in on itself beneath
the window that was losing
its winter light by the minute.

Some mornings the bow was
all I brought back,
slowly leaving my life
in her care, burying its
worst moments like the arrows
I would lose in the long grasses
behind her country home.
I lived to draw the bowstring
arrowless to the anchor point,
to hold still—forefinger brushing
my beard—and sight the mist
rising at daybreak before I left
for a house I lived in by myself.

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The bow's belly is a shade
lighter than its back and shows
crosswise cracks. Its handle
is marked by the flight
of arrows aimed at paper
foxes tacked to hay bales.
After twenty years, I doubt
my aim. But it feels right
to take the bow in my hands
again, to flex it against
my foot, to ease the string
in place and carry it out
into the long fields
that border our life.

—*Floyd Skloot*

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The lie

No wonder you go stooped, shouldering a dead
weight as though a statue cast in lead
straddled your life. And yet the load consists
of matter which does not exist.
Cunning artificer, your artifact,
hollow as it is heavy, rides your back
in public daylight, in solipsist sleep,
granting no breather, no reprieve to drop
the secret bending you to its own shape.

—Alfred Dorn

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Art

Autumn alphabet

by Jed Perl

Avigdor Arikha. There were a couple of richly evocative interiors in Avigdor Arikha's show at the Marlborough Gallery last October. They were works in which this Israeli artist (who's a longtime resident of Paris) turns his attention to the casual jumble of posters and reproductions that covers a wall of his atelier, a wall near a staircase that ascends to one of those typically Parisian balconies. Arikha doesn't give us a tightly realistic rendering of this wall full of printed matter; he paints everything with feathery strokes of the brush, so that we can make out some of the reproductions, but vaguely—a Poussin, for instance, or the edge of a poster for one of Arikha's own shows. The effect is of an assortment of familiar visual friends caught quickly yet concisely, the way you catch sight of things when you walk into your own home. *Up to the Loggia* (a pastel) and *Studio Wall* (an oil) are in tones of gray and brown and tan; they bring to mind the intimism of the turn-of-the-century English painter Walter Sickert.

Arikha makes the sleepy Parisian studio look like the nicest place on earth, a snug retreat where models doze, interesting books sit in mild disorder on the shelves, and the pleasures of Europe are just beyond the tall, old-fashioned windows any time the artist wants to take a break. Though Arikha's paintings are done directly from life, these are the only couple of his works that have ever struck me as being emotionally direct. Arikha, who writes occasionally for *The New York Review of Books* and other publications, is here being direct about his intellectuality—the Poussin poster reminds us of a show devoted to Poussin's *Rape of the Sabines* for which Arikha wrote a catalogue in 1979. His studio views give us a peek into the pleasantly bohemian mores of the international art-and-literature set.

These are quiet, unprepossessing pictures—they don't carry you very far. But on their own anecdotal terms they're infinitely more successful than the Arikha paintings that aim to be deep, to show us man's condition. What grabs viewers in most of Arikha's work, including most of the work in this Marlborough show, is the peculiar mix of coziness and alienation. The coziness is in the swift brushstrokes which Arikha uses to paint his unexceptional still life objects, his models in rumpled clothes, his nudes with pale flesh and dark hair. The alienation is in the coldly formal compositions which isolate bizarrely cropped figures and objects against expanses of white wall. Arikha's coziness/alienation equation never really computes.

In a statement for the catalogue of the show at Marlborough, Arikha defines his position as a realist by attacking the idea of "schemata" in art—that is, norms of representation. He speaks somewhat disparagingly of those, "like Gian-Pietro Bellori in the seventeenth century or Wilhelm Worringer in the twentieth, [who] believed in fixed rules preceding qualitative judg-

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ment. Did it occur to their followers that true art takes the pulse of its epoch at its inception and has a chance of remaining 'modern' to future generations when drawn from life, not from precept?" Arikha says he believes in direct perception. This *is* an intellectual position, only Arikha's paintings don't really bear it out. First: the way Arikha isolates objects and flattens them out close to the surface is a modernist schemata if ever there was one. Second: exactly what he fails to show us is what we perceive directly, such as the particular color and texture of a piece of produce. Arikha's peppers, onions, books, and clothing are all painted the same. He doesn't make (or even attempt to make) the variety of the world convincing in pictorial terms. Rather than giving himself over to nature, Arikha imposes an idea upon nature. This would be okay, except that Arikha claims not to impose. Immodesty in the guise of modesty is a very dangerous thing. In those paintings of the studio wall Arikha *is* a modest artist, telling us quiet little anecdotes about his life, and his work takes on a new interest and liveliness.

Bill Barrell. Grown-up artists who take their inspiration from children's drawings annoy us at least as often as they delight us. The representational shorthand that a child uses in a spirit of absolute sincerity can look thin and false in the adult's rehash; and as a sentimental view of childhood replaces the thing itself, the diabolism of the child's imagination gets lost, or bleached out. Paul Klee is the only artist who ever really topped the children; he gave a child's inspiration the depth and resonance of a grown-up's inspiration. Elsewhere, adults turn the child's ingenuousness into disingenuousness; or—maybe even worse—the ingenuousness is maintained but somehow trivialized. Crossing the mine field of the faux naïf, almost no artist comes out unscathed. Bill Barrell, who showed his paintings at Ingber in October, does better than most. The gentle whimsicality of his childish figures carries through into the gently ramshackle style of his semi-abstract compositions.

In Barrell's most enjoyable compositions (*A Burst of Ideas* and *Heart Makers*) scrabbly caricature people are involved in cheerfully absurdist activities—making hearts, tossing off ideas (i.e., little bits of abstracted imagery). The pleasure of the work is in its scattershot inventiveness. Barrell uses conceits such as the blue-blob person in *Heart Makers* only once or twice, and thereby avoids the predictability of much child-inspired art. One never knows what's going to turn up in these paintings: the amusing incidents in *A Burst of Ideas* include a blue handprint against a maroon backdrop and a ladder made of lines of blue, orange, and lime green. The little coloristic events can be very good (Barrell was a Hofmann student years ago). Sometimes, Barrell presents an American, Rube Goldberg-style version of Miró's chromatic elegance.

Barrell's paintings are best viewed from close up, so that his gaggle of abstract and representational forms overwhelms us and becomes our entire frame of reference. His paintings are like images seen in a kaleidoscope where abstract forms jostle representational ones, with each little fragmentary bit standing at an odd angle in relation to the next fragmentary bit. You enter these paintings the way you'd enter a funhouse—step by step, taking nothing for granted. Weakest are Barrell's attempts at resolving his compositions. The corners in *A Burst of Ideas*, for instance, where squarish forms are marshaled to stabilize the structure, end up looking contrived. Barrell's desire to give the paintings formal coherence sits uneasily with compositions that by their very nature seem to elude coherence. At fifty-six, Barrell remains an interestingly unresolved artist.

Barrell's flaky style will remind some viewers of the work of Jean-Michel Basquiat, the artist whose death last summer of a drug overdose set off a storm of end-of-the-Eighties-art-world articles. Annina Nosei (Basquiat's first dealer) had a memorial show in December. Basquiat—who, like Barrell, looked at the paintings of Dubuffet and the Dutch Cobra group—was far from being

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the worst artist of the 1980s. His work, full of naïvely cartoonish characters, may actually be better composed than Barrell's. Basquiat's figures, with their squarish heads and bodies and angular gestures, fit neatly into the rectangle of the canvas. But there's something dull about the very competence of Basquiat's work; his juxtapositions of colors, his riffs, don't offer much surprise. In a sense Barrell's work is less secure stylistically than Basquiat's; but Barrell's lack of security is the source of his pictorial whimsy, his ability to keep us amused.

There were a number of smaller paintings in Barrell's show that took off on tangents—delightful tangents. One of the loveliest was *The Green Cat*, a bluish painting in which the artist, standing at right, points a long paint brush toward a model, who stands with her back to him at the left. Here Barrell is working out of Picasso's "Artist and Model" series of the 1960s and achieving an original variation: Barrell's scrawled reminiscences of Picasso. The nude is just a few smears of paint surrounded by an outline; but the blue color here creates a palpably erotic atmosphere. Barrell's work has been compared to Robert Beauchamp's and George McNeil's. He's infinitely superior to Beauchamp, whose work is always gross and overheated. What Barrell is doing now recalls the excitement that George McNeil generated a decade and more ago with the first of his cartoonish pictures. Only Barrell's work is gentler than McNeil's. Barrell is a little like one of the goofy figures in his paintings—an addled nudnik, trying this, trying that. He's like Charlie Chaplin in the assembly-line scene from *Modern Times*—an artist caught in the midst of things that are bigger than he is.

Ross Bleckner. Ross Bleckner is a more substantial artist than he was a couple of years ago when he began the series of deep blue and black paintings that memorialize victims of the AIDS epidemic. Bleckner's imagery is more pointed now, more clearly inflected. The disembodied little white hands that reach out toward us from the gloom of many of the new paintings are *chilling*. The spectacle of a postmodern artist imagining his dead friends—or, as in the title of one painting, a *Friend of a Friend*—in a heavenly outer space is something you can't quite get out of your head. These paintings, which were at Mary Boone in October and November, seem to be the product of necessity. They feel urgent, and yet they illustrate a mystery rather than ever creating one. The shining lights floating toward us through the darkness are a deft, poetic idea; but the way Bleckner carries out the idea, with the points of light represented by blobs of white paint dabbed atop the surface, isn't visually compelling. There's nothing mysterious about Bleckner's technique.

The mood here is one of overcultivated fantasy—a *fin de siècle* mood. The lights that shimmer out from the gloom recall Gustave Moreau's jewel-box atmosphere. That connection may suggest a certain problem with Bleckner's work. Moreau, like Bleckner, is an artist whose effects are episodic and overly literary. Moreau's mood painting was to find its fulfillment in artists who made the medium itself magical—in Redon's dreamy pastels and the heavily impastoed oil paintings of Moreau's student Rouault. An artist who invokes Moreau today is invoking the weakest, most literary side of symbolism—a dusty symbolism. I expect this is part of Bleckner's idea; he wants to recall the brittle aestheticism of an earlier age, with its ghostly birds and icy diadems. But nostalgia is only effective in painting when an artist gives the old material a new shape, a new urgency. While Bleckner's paintings are dated 1987 and 1988, the dust seems to have settled over them a very long time ago.

Denise Colomb. Paris is one of the most photogenic—and most photographed—cities in the world. Certainly no city appears in more great photographs, so it's an event when a photographer manages to get something new out of Paris, as Denise Colomb does in a series of pictures that were shown at the Zabriskie Gallery in October. Training

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her camera at the reflections in puddles along the curb, Colomb comes up with luminous gray images—people, trees, buildings, even a bit of the Eiffel Tower. The effect—delicate, dreamy, a little crazy—is of a topsy-turvy romanticism. Here Paris becomes a string of quirky vagrant encounters, all seen through a watery mirror, a mirror that makes the streets of the city look like swatches of silk moiré.

Peggy Cyphers. Styles don't die, they just go underground for a while. That, at least, would seem to be a moral of the 1980s. Take biomorphic abstraction, a style which Clement Greenberg hoped to lay to rest more than forty years ago when he bemoaned a "return of elements of representation, smudged contour lines, and the third dimension. Images, no longer locked to the surface in a flat profile, reappear against indeterminate, atmospheric depths." He associated this painting with a "return to the human-all-too-human, too obvious emotion, and academic subterfuges." His review of a show called "A Problem for Critics," organized by Howard Putzel in 1945, still raises hackles among old-timers who like biomorphism. Now, biomorphism is back . . . and Greenberg still has a point, and his detractors still have a point, too. The time, indeed, has come to sharpen up some of the old arguments, because one problem with much of the new biomorphism is that the painters want to have it both ways—they want symbols, but they want pure form, too. Terry Winters, for one, dribbles biomorphic forms across Abstract Expressionist spaces, and comes up with paintings that are tasteful and flavorless—biomorphism lite.

What I like about the work of the thirty-four-year-old painter Peggy Cyphers (who had a show at E. M. Donahue in October) is that it's unabashedly, one might almost say shamelessly, biomorphic. Cyphers does all the Greenberg no-nos (she even gives her show a literary title, "Biomorphic Impressionism") and comes up with something that's obvious but also poetic. Working on tall slender surfaces made up of aluminum (the top quarter or so) and wood (the bottom three quarters), she paints dreamily unfolding shell-like and snake-like and flower-like forms that bring O'Keeffe and Baziotes to mind.

The gimmick in Cyphers's paintings is that each one consists of a sharply rendered part (the part painted on aluminum) that's reflected in a grainier, softer version (the part painted on wood). The lower section is like a romantic recollection of the original motif. Repeated in painting after painting in hues that encompass an entire rainbow of Kleenex-box pastels, Cypher's unfolding images, with their faintly anthropomorphic configurations, are hypnotic. The dreamy precision of the shapes suggests an artist for whom painting is a form of meditation (as one suspects it was for O'Keeffe). The way the upper part of the painting is reflected and changed in the lower part engages us, holds our attention as the patterns and variations in a Persian carpet sometimes will.

These paintings are eccentric sci-fi dreams. From the statements that Cyphers has put out in the brochure for her show and in an interview in *Cover* magazine, I gather that she's into some half-crazy variety of sociobiology. "Nature," she writes, "in this present biological and chemically fractured society looms sinister in its altered and artificial state. Meanwhile we confront root nature as a precious holy specimen—reacquainting ourselves with the truth bearer of our being and consciousness." Cyphers's paintings are illustrations of this nutty metaphysics. It's the sort of stuff that drives the Clement Greenbergs of this world to distraction—and, of course, they're right; but, well, only up to a point.

Richard Diebenkorn. There were lovely moments in Richard Diebenkorn's drawing retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art: a loopy, casual charcoal drawing, *Seated Woman, Reaching Down* (1960); an ink wash and charcoal drawing with velvety dark depths, *Seated Woman, Tennis Sweater* (1960); a broad, horizontal abstraction full of mazey gray lines, *Untitled (Ocean Park)*

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(1976); and another mazey abstraction, this one vertical, from 1977.[1] But mostly the work looked over-refined and under-developed: Diebenkorn playing with the same predictable themes in the same predictable ways. What Diebenkorn calls the creative process, I'd call noodling around in the studio—self-indulgence. Over a forty-year career, he's raised graphic delicacy to an aesthetic principle. Those quivering lines and washes half-covering other lines are empty gestures.

The Modern show was organized by John Elderfield, who's divided Diebenkorn's career into three phases: Early Abstract Period (1948-55); Representational Period (1956-67); Ocean Park Period (1967-88). The show was big—approximately one hundred and eighty works—and clearly Elderfield believed that Diebenkorn's work would look good in bulk. The first, and worst, section surveyed Diebenkorn's unknowledgeable knockoffs of de Kooning-type Abstract Expressionism. This kind of thing was a dime a dozen in the Fifties. You wouldn't think it would be that difficult to understand what de Kooning did with Cubism; but Diebenkorn seems unaware that the whole point is to compose *across* the surface, end to end. Instead, he wanders aimlessly, inscribing the first zillion or so of those pointlessly sensitive lines that are still wandering aimlessly through his work thirty years later.

The level of the show does rise considerably when Diebenkorn turns to drawing from life, mostly the female figure, in the late Fifties. Nature gives his work a sense of order. Real space is a set of coordinates which can be related to the coordinates of the page. Reduction from a known quantity works better for Diebenkorn than pure invention à la Abstract Expressionism. (As an Abstract Expressionist, Diebenkorn was a naïf—a provincial art school product.) Still, Diebenkorn never brings his women to life. For him the human figure is little more than an abstraction, a form to abstract from. Diebenkorn's women are nobodies, and I expect he believes their blankness is inspired and justified by the blankness of some of Matisse's women.

Diebenkorn is hardly the only artist who has taken an aspect of Matisse, his virtually abstract side, for the essence of Matisse. By overlooking the dialectical nature of the Frenchman's art—especially the dialectic between anatomy and abstraction—Diebenkorn misses the emotional force of the simplifications. At times, in the Teens and in the charcoal drawings of the late 1930s and 1940s, Matisse does take the risk of anonymity; but his abstractions are based on a study of the emotional and erotic implications of anatomy. I believe that Pierre Schneider was correct when, in his book on Matisse, he explained the extreme simplifications in some portraits of Madame Matisse as attempts to turn a French housewife into an icon. Like the icon-makers of Christianity, Matisse is stripping away the veil of nature to reveal an essence—a human essence. Some of Matisse's later abstracted figures are erotic icons, sexual essences. Diebenkorn's simplifications work in reverse, against the figure, and thus distance us from exactly what might interest us. For Diebenkorn figure drawing isn't something that takes place between the artist and the model; it's something that takes place between the artist and the paper. This is academicized Matisse. What's lost is the life force. What's left are Matissean mannerisms, mostly the erased lines, which even Matisse himself at times overdid.

It's also from Matisse that Diebenkorn picked up the signals that sent him back into non-figurative work in the late Sixties. We're so used to considering Matisse's *Piano Lesson* and some other semi-abstract paintings of

1 "The Drawings of Richard Diebenkorn" was on display at the Museum of Modern Art from November 17 through January 10. It is now on view at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art through May 7, and will then travel to the San Francisco Museum of Art and the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C. The catalogue, by John Elderfield, is published by MOMA and the Houston Fine Art Press (204 pages, $48).

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the Teens as seminal masterpieces that we tend to forget how very idiosyncratic they are. This is Matisse's personal version of Cubism—a version that gives Cubism a blunt and (considering the absence of Cubist chiaroscuro) almost naïve power. Matisse doesn't break nature up, he pares it down. This is Cubism without Cubist theory; and let us not forget that by 1915 Cubism had become an orthodoxy among the avant-garde. I suspect that for Diebenkorn—who is an art-world outsider by virtue of being a California artist—the outsider aspect of Matisse's Cubism holds a considerable appeal. By working out of Matisse's nature abstraction, Diebenkorn believes he can become a seminal but unorthodox abstractionist.

The problem for Diebenkorn is that *The Piano Lesson* is one of those paintings in which Matisse constructed an endpoint—a point of reduction beyond which he was unwilling or unable to go. And Diebenkorn has taken this as his starting point. He's eliminated the boy and the piano and all the other realistic elements, but he hasn't gotten beyond them, he's just mooned over *The Piano Lesson* for twenty years, serving up an endless series of variations on those verticals and horizontals as well as on those orchestrations of gray and blue and green. *The Piano Lesson* isn't my favorite Matisse—I get a bit bored with Matisse's let's-see-how-little-we-can-make-do-with routine. But maybe it would look more interesting today if Diebenkorn hadn't been reprising it for so many years in his paintings and drawings. Diebenkorn carries reduction into illegibility. What are all those lines in the Ocean Park drawings? Where are they leading us? How much gray-blue fog can we take with no end in sight?

I know that the generally attentive audience at the Diebenkorn show didn't feel the way I did. I think I understand what they felt. Diebenkorn gives people something to look at. These are drawings which you can look at and say, "Now, why did he do that in that corner?" Or, "Why did he use that red there?" You can talk about them the way

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you talk about works of art. Diebenkorn is maneuvering compositional elements; that's about it. The translucent overlaps and smudged lines that many take for Diebenkorn's poetry look to me like much ado about nothing.

Paul Georges. Paul Georges—who's sixty-five—has never had a show that was all of a piece, logically consistent, or totally satisfying; he's probably never intended to. While his most assured works are generally landscapes, still lifes, or figures in which his virtuoso brushwork gives the world a clear yet lush beauty, his most ambitious works are often mythological fantasies in which America's youth fly through the air as if Tiepolo had met the Spirit of the Sixties. Georges's show in December at the Anne Plumb Gallery contained, as usual, both kinds of paintings; only for once everything seemed to be clicking, and the show elicited the kind of response Georges probably wants from us—a "Wow!"

The show was built around the chastity-and-death story of Diana and Actaeon, which is told by Ovid in the *Metamorphoses.* The hunter Actaeon accidentally comes upon Diana bathing with her nymphs; in revenge for his having seen the chaste Diana naked, the goddess turns Actaeon into a stag, and he's devoured by his own hounds. Part of the appeal of the story for a painter lies in the role silence plays: Diana says to Actaeon, who's on the verge of becoming a stag: "Now tell that you have seen me naked—provided you are able to tell." And he's unable to explain to his own hounds who he is. In the story the coldness of Diana contrasts with Actaeon's bloody end: "Not till he had died from his many wounds was the wrath of quiver-bearing Diana assuaged." A paperback copy of Ovid sat on the desk at Anne Plumb while the show was up. I felt that Georges's inspiration must also have come from Titian's paintings on the theme (*Diana Surprised by Actaeon* and *The Death of Actaeon*) and, perhaps, from the discussion and various illustrations of the theme in Erwin Panofsky's marvelous chapter on Ovid in his *Problems in Titian.*

Dry renderings of mythological themes have made fairly frequent appearances in the galleries in recent years; but dull pedantry has nothing to do with Georges. He recycles Ovid and Titian in his own haywire terms. His brushwork—loose, but at its best deftly descriptive—conveys a modern artist's giddy enthusiasm for the Venetians. Georges sees the myth as a conflict between deep greens (the forest where Diana bathes and Actaeon dies) and deep red (the color of Actaeon's blood, of his "many wounds"). In Georges's paintings, Actaeon is shown with a stag's head and a man's body— in the midst of the transformation, exactly where Titian shows him. Diana, however, isn't the sophisticated mannerist beauty of Titian's compositions; she's more like a nubile adolescent. In *Diana and Actaeon—River/Sky* (79 1/2 x 142 1/4 inches), Actaeon flees from Diana toward us and almost lunges out of the painting at us. Meanwhile, Diana stands off in the middle distance, a cheerful menace with a bow and arrow—a Nabokovish goddess. If there are unfinished or unresolved bits in the Actaeon figure, it is nevertheless the best painted of Georges's mythological subjects. The head and the arms of this half-stag-half-man are dashed with brilliantly muscular strokes. The stag's head seems to shatter the picture plane. The larger *Red Diana and Actaeon* (153 x 137 inches) sets the dying Actaeon in a beautiful broad green landscape which is based on the Norman countryside where Georges has lived in recent years. Characteristically, he gives this landscape an eccentric twist, by letting the composition slough off at the edges, so that large swaths of red underpainting press into the green idyll.

Downstairs at Anne Plumb Gallery there were some smaller versions of the Diana and Actaeon theme, together with miscellaneous landscapes and a double portrait. Everywhere that high-keyed red-red kept reappearing: as the red floral border around a palm tree, as the dress and tricycle in a portrait of Georges's daughter and granddaughter. The palm tree painting and another landscape featuring a massive tree trunk were broadly

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treated, richly felt. The portrait of Georges's daughter and granddaughter is the best of his attempts at classical portraiture that I've seen: an orchestration of grays, with the red dress and red trike creating a powerful counterweight. This is Georges in a Velázquez mood—and it comes off amazingly well. The faces (which look like faces in a Derain) are convincing; the reds keep the old-fashioned grays from banality. And Georges himself makes a brilliant surprise appearance, in the form of an eerie self-portrait that hangs on the wall behind his progeny.

Georges has for years been a presence in New York as a teacher and proselytizer for figurative art. In some respects he's been a dangerous influence, leading young artists to paroxysms of ambitiousness that their meager technique can't support. With his gonzo painterly virtuosity, he may be one of those artists who turn their own disdain of the academic into a new kind of academy. Yet from the years when I first saw his paintings at the Green Mountain Gallery to the present there have been occasions when his extravagant conceits rang true. The Diana and Actaeon theme may be a reach for Georges, a healthy reach. For a male artist, Diana and Actaeon is a theme of self-exposure: man as the one who's vulnerable, changed, silenced, killed. Maybe a sense of danger is good for Georges—it gives an edge to his macho self-assurance. Certainly, he is closer to putting it all together here than he ever has been before. There are rhapsodically beautiful passages in the big *Red Diana and Actaeon*. The middle distance, with its rolling Norman hills and toylike church steeple, stopped me in my tracks.

Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres. "The Presence of Ingres," a study of Ingres's influence mounted at the Jan Krugier Gallery in November and December, was a delight. (And the catalogue, a cache of pamphlets and reproductions tucked into a deep blue paper folder, was adorable.) Though works by Chasseriau, Degas, and Balthus were included, the real subject here was the relationship between Ingres on the one hand and Matisse and Picasso on the other. Presented catty-corner were a large study in oil for Ingres's *Portrait of the Comtesse d'Haussonville* and an oil by Picasso of his wife Olga, from 1917, in which Olga's head, arms, and torso roughly duplicate the pose of the Ingres. Turning from the Ingres to the Picasso we saw Picasso underlining elements, extending implications. Picasso is fascinated by Ingres's sensuous curves and ripely sculptural modeling; he's also fascinated by the way the woman's sensual beauty is encased in the image of a conventional bourgeois. With Ingres, the eroticism of the image is held in check—not conventionalized, but restrained—by a recognition that conventions exist; and Picasso seems to be learning from this. So does Matisse, in *The Plumed Hat*, one of a series of drawings and paintings from 1919 where the accoutrements of dress form a touchingly elegant frame for the model's quiet beauty. All in all, the show suggested the million ways in which the twin stars of Parisian modernism ransacked Ingres. To everything they took from him, they gave a personal, twentieth-century twist: what's flattened out in Ingres is flatter in Matisse and Picasso; what's erotic in Ingres can become virtually pornographic in these later artists. I think it was Virgil Thomson who called Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress* super-charged Mozart; Matisse and Picasso do super-charged Ingres.

I was a bit disheartened by the mood at the Krugier show. People were so damned sober as they moved around the room, from gem to gem. To me, the show was a binge: Picasso and Matisse as two intoxicated geniuses, getting high on a genius who himself had an intoxicated side but wanted people to believe he was the epitome of responsibility—an academician. The show made one suspect that Picasso and Matisse knew Ingres's yearnings better than he knew them himself. But could they match the stubborn constancy of an artist who worked on certain portraits for decades? The show was a hymn to the elasticity of traditions, to

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the wonderful ways in which artists can commune with one another and yet remain themselves.

In the back room there was a Picasso etching of Olga from 1923 that was more Boldini than Ingres. It was about the decline and fall of the society portrait, about how Ingres's brand of perfectionist portraiture fell into a decadence. Some will say that neither Picasso nor Matisse could ever pull off a masterpiece with the polished completeness of Ingres's *Comtesse d'Haussonville* in the Frick or *La Princesse de Broglie* in the Met. (A favorite New York game is arguing which is greater.) But Matisse and Picasso make up for their rough-and-tumble surfacey-ness with the Olympian reach of their imaginations.

Ronald Jones. Ronald Jones's installation at Metro Pictures in November was a cool horror show, a horror show you couldn't understand without reading the accompanying text.

In the center of Metro's large, broad space, Jones made a seven-foot pile of plywood sheets, all cut in the same odd, roughly rectangular shape, with curving sides and several indentations. The pile was accompanied by several smaller heaps that gave the effect of things toppling over onto the floor. Eight pieces of plywood—in the same shape—projected off the walls, each secured by four black pipes. These wall pieces were stained a reddish tone; and if you walked around to the back of them, you found, silkscreened there in black, a sort of German Expressionist woodcut of a scene of torture. I actually didn't go around to look at the backs of the panels until I'd read the handout that came with the show. This bore a sketch by Erich Mendelsohn of the Columbushaus, a large office building built in Berlin in 1932, and told a strange story about the convergence of modernist architecture and the Nazi police state. Once you'd looked at Mendelsohn's sketch, you realized that the shape of the plywood sheets was a section of Mendelsohn's building, and Jones's horror show started to have its effect.

In his text, Jones explains that "the Columbushaus was the last building of Erich Mendelsohn's German period . . . . Its functional modern design led the developers of Mendelsohn's building to present it in the image of the American metropolis, and in the same spirit, to name it the Columbushaus. F. W. Woolworth Company, the well-known American dimestore chain, leased the ground floor of the building in January of 1932. On January 31, 1933, the day after Adolf Hitler became Chancellor, Erich Mendelsohn fled Germany, never to return. [One wonders how long Woolworth's remained in the Columbushaus. Jones doesn't say.] The next month, impressed with Mendelsohn's free interiors and hidden rear entrances, the German SS leased the top six floors to house its Schutz Haft program (protective custody)." The long and the short of the story is that "the modern open floor plan of the Columbushaus permitted the SS to design the space around the particular requirements of detention and torture." The prison was closed in 1936, when the space proved too small; as Jones concludes, "for three years the SS Columbus prison had operated in total secrecy, hiding its unspeakable purpose behind the crisp curving facade. During those years, looking up from the hectic avenues converging onto the Potsdamer Platz, the Columbushaus could only have been mistaken for the quintessence of modern enterprise."

At a time when many left-wing artists and critics are eager to tell us that art is incapable of transcending cultural pressures (the terms of its production, as they say), this story makes a neat fit. Here we have a Jewish modernist inadvertently designing Nazi torture chambers. The history of the Columbushaus is ghastly, and bizarre. And Jones makes his installation memorable through the iciness of his presentation. He draws us in with an elegant exercise in postmodern minimalism—and then he turns the tables on us, telling us that this neat, clean installation is really about the most appalling atrocities. The list of contemporary artists who are using or abusing Nazi

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history gets longer by the minute. Since I wrote about Kiefer in December, I've heard that Judy Chicago, Louise Fishman, and Larry Rivers have done Holocaust works. Jones's installation is one case of a reconsideration of Nazi crimes that's bathos-free. It's a stunning anecdote cleanly told.

Jeff Koons. I can't say I had any particular response to the Jeff Koons show at Sonnabend in December. The oversized porcelain statues of a white-faced Michael Jackson and a naked prepubescent boy and girl didn't strike me as being any worse than anything else Koons has done—or, for that matter, any worse than things that Robert Longo and many others have done. Weighing the relative bad taste of knick-knacks cast in stainless steel (in Koons's last show) against knickknacks done in polychrome porcelain (in this show) isn't anything I'd care to do. More tasteless might be more interesting—in some cases. Koons, however, is such a dull, calculating artist that interesting doesn't enter into it. He's an easy target. As Peter Schjeldahl pointed out in a weirdly obsequious review in *7 Days*, Koons shows "a special smirk to every available point of view." Koons can't be said to lower the general level of discourse; he's just down there with the rest of 'em. I'm far more disturbed by the likes of George Condo—a hype artist masquerading as a serious Surrealist painter, and getting away with it.

Leon Kossoff. The most interesting artist to reach these shores from England in the 1980s is the sixty-two-year-old Leon Kossoff. In his first New York show, at Hirschl & Adler Modern in 1983, and again, in his show at Robert Miller last November, we saw a realist who is also an expressionist, an artist who combines anti-romantic subjects (grimy urban streets, a crowded public swimming pool) and hyper-romantic paint surfaces (surfaces that are as thick and rumpled as a stucco wall). Some people believe Kossoff's surfaces are an affectation and an obfuscation; they feel that the build-up of paint, which Kossoff sometimes

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finishes off with a drizzle of white skeins, leads us away from the subject, exhibits too much the agonies of the studio. I have no particular fondness for angst-ridden painting, but I don't find Kossoff's work angst-ridden. His morass of strokes is probably based on Constable's late manner—a morass that falls into place. When I step a few feet away from a Kossoff painting I don't find all the paint distracting. It turns into atmosphere—into a gray, rainy-yet-light-filled English day. Kossoff's screwy, agitated brushwork recalls that of Soutine, another Jewish expressionist with a yearning for French clarity.

The subjects that Kossoff takes from public life are wonderfully original; they reveal an artist who's really in touch with our times. In the Hirschl & Adler show there were pictures of a public swimming pool full of children (each kid is drawn quickly, made into a lively individual) which gave us a glimpse of a gritty urban democracy we've never seen in paint before. In the Robert Miller show there was an interesting view of *A Street in Willesden*, with a pair of young lovers shambling along the sidewalk and a middle-aged man sitting on a bench, his head oddly cocked to one side, as if he were off dreaming in a world of his own. These scenes set in public places catch the curious randomness of life and suggest through their odd jumps in space and scale the labyrinthine complexity of our responses.

Kossoff has written about beginning work on a group of paintings of Christ Church, an eighteenth-century parish church designed by Nicholas Hawksmoor. "In the dusty sunlight of this August day, when this part of London still looks and feels like the London of Blake's Jerusalem, I find myself involved once again in making drawings and the idea of a painting begins to emerge. The urgency that drives me to work is not only to do with the pressures of the accumulation of memories and the unique quality of the subject on this particular day but also with the awareness that time is short, that soon the mass of this building will be dwarfed by more looming office blocks and overshadowed." One feels the artist's gathering excitement in the resulting paintings, which have a bluish-whitish brightness. The bulk of Christ Church looms out at us, a dramatic presence on an ordinary city street.

I'm less sympathetic to the paintings Kossoff does of studio subjects—brick-red nudes, and, in the new show, a series of paintings of a middle-aged man named Chaim. These figures, handled in one or two tones, are a little underdeveloped volumetrically. Still, the faces reveal an interesting sense of personality and suggest the degree to which, for Kossoff, characterization and caricature are intertwined. This accounts for the vibrant individuality of many of the figures in the larger compositions.

There are very few artists in the world today who can compose scenes of modern life. Kossoff is one of them. Two shows are not enough to suggest the full range and character of the work; too much depends on the selection. The catalogue of the Robert Miller show included many paintings that were not hanging in the gallery. I would have liked to see these, too. The Hirschl & Adler Modern and Robert Miller galleries have done a great service by bringing Kossoff to our attention. Kossoff's universe—with its worn-out buildings and shabby figures—recalls the post-Empire England of another artist, Lucian Freud. Only what Freud presents as dry documentary Kossoff transforms into an individual poetic style. He's an original.

Richard La Presti. Bigger is better isn't a rule that often holds in art, but it's definitely the case with the work of Richard La Presti, whose paintings of crowd-filled beaches were at the Bowery Gallery in October. La Presti uses broad, flat strokes of the brush to mold his mob of sun-tanned bathers, his tracks of pink and yellow sand, his blue-green expanses of ocean and sky. In many of the paintings, which are broad horizontal compositions a couple of feet wide, those strokes get in the way, call too much attention to themselves. But when he works bigger—as in the fifty-inch-wide *Crowded*

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Beach Day—the strokes start to build into an engaging impasto, and the staccato calligraphy takes off. In the larger paintings, which are worked on in the studio over a period of time, the very thickness of the surface becomes a metaphor for the overcrowded beach—teeming brushwork stands in for teeming humanity.

There's an odd mix of impulses that flow together into these beach pictures. La Presti's approach is in the French plein-air tradition; his expressionist color calligraphy recalls Dufy, Marquet, and Vlaminck. And yet there's something about the raucously plebeian subject matter of bronzed hordes at public beaches in Brooklyn and on Long Island that's closer to the mind-set of 1950s beach-party movies—Annette Funicello and Frankie Avalon and the twist-and-shout gang. Though La Presti doesn't quite have those impulses in focus together, it's the good taste-bad taste tension that gives these paintings their spark. I'd say that the formalized fluidity of La Presti's brushwork sometimes works against the cartoonish fun; part of what's engaging in the larger paintings is the specificity of the incidents. In *Crowded Beach Day*, the center foreground is held by a dame in shades and lipstick, and you can see that La Presti gets a kick out of her beach-party chic.

Manet, Seurat, and Dufy have all done great paintings of outdoor entertainments. Perhaps these are subjects with which Europeans have an easier time than Americans. Growing up in societies that make no bones about the class system, the European artists are comfortable articulating a class situation: the petit bourgeoisie or lower classes at play. American artists have generally gone soft and sentimental when they represent the American masses. Is La Presti looking at the bathers as others, or does he want to join them? I read him as a loner with proletarian leanings. I think we could get a clearer picture if he'd go further in the direction of spirited parody—loving parody.

La Presti throws off his bold, choppy brushstrokes with masterly ease. In a series of still lifes that made up the remainder of his show he was moving from inanimate objects into a sort of Abstract Expressionist space. Figurative Abstract Expressionism isn't a type of painting I'm particularly partial to; but La Presti does it brilliantly, and as painterly abstractions these were infinitely more interesting than most of what is presented as neo-Abstract Expressionism nowadays. At forty-six, La Presti is a painter with a reputation among the small group of New Yorkers who really follow what painter Louis Finkelstein once called, in a 1975 show he organized, "Painterly Representation." La Presti's show—his second at Bowery, after exhibiting at the First Street Gallery in the mid-Seventies—was a must-see in certain circles. Painterly representation continues to be one of the most vital directions in American art. Still, it's economically and critically moribund. The artists Finkelstein included in his show in 1975—among them were Leland Bell, Nell Blaine, Gretna Campbell, Robert De Niro, and Paul Resika—have never become superstars; but they've done okay. The artists in their thirties and forties who've continued in this line—they include La Presti, Rita Baragona, Temma Bell, Susan Daykin, Esti Dunow, William Plevin-Foust, and Stanley Lewis—are every bit as distinguished a company as that older group, but their fate, critically and financially speaking, has been even worse. In the Yuppy Eighties, they're simply overlooked.

Being the underdog isn't fun—it breeds an underdog mentality. Things have gotten so bad for the painterly representational crowd—there are so few opportunities—that even their biggest fans are sometimes in danger of losing faith. Last season I reported on two shows that were mounted in New York City to memorialize Gretna Campbell, who'd died in the summer of 1987 at the age of sixty-five. This fall, the art school at Yale University, where Campbell had taught, mounted the largest Campbell show ever (over thirty paintings) and even her fans were a bit startled at how magnificently the paintings held the space. In a just world, that show would

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have travelled straight to the Whitney.

The Yale show demonstrated how Campbell's art deepened in the last few years of her life. But such triumphs go largely unsung. La Presti's show this fall was miles beyond his show two years ago at Bowery, and there's nothing more exciting than seeing an artist find the extent of his powers. La Presti is becoming a more pointed artist. Would that there was an audience with the patience, the stamina, the stick-to-it-iveness to be there for La Presti and his contemporaries if they win through in the end.

George Negroponte. In his show at John Good in October, George Negroponte exhibited two series of paintings: the larger paintings, in the range of seven or eight feet, were in oil on canvas; the smaller paintings, all sixteen by twelve inches, were in encaustic (a wax-based medium) on wood. The oils are much like Negroponte's earlier work, vapid abstract compositions with amorphous swooning shapes. I can see no rhyme or reason to them. The encaustics, a new medium for the artist, are a breakthrough—something lovely and surprising. I tend to be skeptical about the potential of a particular medium to release an artist's creativity, but that's exactly what has happened here.

Filling the small wood panels with hundreds of inch-or-so-long encaustic marks, Negroponte creates little pictorial hurricanes and cloud bursts. The density of the wax medium serves to wake Negroponte up to the beauty of the surface. He draws and smears, rubs down and builds up again. Working in a wide range of pungent colors—from dusky maroons to beach-day yellows to coppery-greens—he creates delightful aerial abstractions. (They have a vaguely 1950s look, like miniaturized early Joan Mitchells or colored versions of de Staël ink drawings.) If the color has a tendency to be overly programmatic (complementaries used by rote) there is also a welcome range of feelings and moods. Negroponte evokes different sorts of "weather"—overcast and sunny days—and different atmospheres, from crystalline to claustrophobic. Ranged in two rows on a big wall in the John Good Gallery, these fourteen encaustic compositions announced proudly, "We're various!"

Katherine Porter. Katherine Porter's new abstract paintings, which were at André Emmerich in October, are image gluts. Painted in a scrabbly painterly style, they sport framing devices that recall the sides of some of John Marin's paintings and gaggles of roughly rectangular forms that recall Marin's off-kilter skyscrapers. Sometimes the confetti-fall of little colored rectangles or the overlapped curves and curls and swirls make one suspect that Porter has Kandinsky in mind; the paintings, though, are too lackadaisically improvisational to really invoke Kandinsky. The mix of elements here is meant to be boisterous, attractive; but it's unfocused painting, mannerisms presented one after the other without any apparent logic. I find myself engaged here and there by what is happening at a corner or by the way a couple of forms intermesh. That is all. There's no way to read these paintings. Porter has rejected the flat space typical of much late twentieth-century abstraction, and for some viewers that rejection is exciting in and of itself. But Porter is incapable of constructing any other kind of space.

Faith Ringgold. When black women get the chance to tell their stories, these stories often seem to be about survival—and even triumph—against all odds. Faith Ringgold invokes the lives of black women in pictorial quilts, some of which were on view at the Bernice Steinbaum Gallery in November. By combining folk-artish figures, fabrics in tackily loud patterns, and bits of narrative prose, Ringgold creates a sweet and sour mood, a mood that we're already familiar with from gospel music and Motown songs. Ringgold's work doesn't have the cathartic force of some of that music; nor is it for people who believe that pictorial values are all—it's not meant for those people. Still, Ringgold's story quilts manage to be sentimental without being cloying, and that's an

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achievement. At moments, she brings off excitingly populist epiphanies—black history Motown style.

The quilted borders in Ringgold's pictures are done in a variety of fabrics that are gratingly off-key—posh velvets, lurid metallics, blowzy patterns. The comically bad taste sets up just the right cheerfully ironic ambience. The central cycle of quilts in the recent show, called *The Bitter Nest*, takes us back to the "legendary" Harlem of the Twenties and Thirties, and, to quote Ringgold, tells the story of "a young black woman doctor named Celia Cleopatra Prince. Her father, Percel Trombone Prince, whom she loved dearly, was a socially prominent black dentist in the Harlem of the twenties. Celia's mother, Cee Cee Markum Prince, a loving wife and mother, was a marvelous cook and homemaker. Cee Cee was known for her unusually decorative home and the unique pieced and quilted bags she filled it with." Ringgold's five-part cycle illustrates central events from Celia's life—"Harlem Renaissance Party," one of her father's famous soirées; "Lovers in Paris," her first experience with a man—through compositions of stiff figures which recall, no doubt intentionally, the art of Florine Stettheimer. Ringgold's view of the black bourgeoisie is gently and whimsically nostalgic. (It reminds me a bit of the view of 1950s suburban life that McDermott and McGough offered in their cycle of drawings at Massimo Audiello last season.) The basic subject is sisterhood and women's lives; it's a subject to which Ringgold brings a gift for characterization and the telling descriptive detail. She enjoys the appointments of a traditional woman's world—the nicely laid-out tables; the comfortably decorated bedrooms. She also enjoys showing us a woman's view of men. She enjoys undressing the men, revealing Celia's first lover in the buff save for his beret. The feminist points are made with a lusty sense of fun. The color here (which often runs to electric blues and shrieking oranges) is an extension of the kicky stories and the lurid fabrics. And there are nice grace notes, as when, on the back of a mirror in the "Lovers in Paris" scene, Ringgold sticks a little sign that reads "Fabrique en Paris."

Another series, *Women on a Bridge,* offers the George Washington Bridge, with its soaring arches, as an emblem of hope for the black women of Harlem. In one quilt in this cycle, *Tar Beach*, kids are sleeping on the roof of their tenement, looking out at the velvet blue sky punctuated by the lights of buildings, bridge, and stars. (This might be Ringgold's version of the pop tune, "Up on the Roof.") In another piece, *Dancing on the George Washington Bridge*, the steel structure becomes the theatrical setting for a messy but jubilant Busby Berkeley routine—women floating in front of the bridge, with its spangles of brilliant light a stand-in for their dreams. Ringgold likes to show women triumphing. The ladies are always outdistancing the men, as in *The Race*, another quilt in the bridge series. But the men are obviously enjoying themselves, too. There's a joie de vivre and a generosity to Ringgold's feminism. Her optimism is infectious.

Kenny Scharf. I went to the Kenny Scharf show at Tony Shafrazi in October in hopes of finding some amusing kitsch. Clearly, that's what Scharf had in mind when he painted a hand in a pink glove holding an Admiral portable transistor radio against a backdrop of Fifties linoleum drips; or (in *Check-Array*) a crude pink checkerboard decorated with a yellow phone, a Zenith portable radio, a Kodak Instamatic, a Zenith Hi-Fi, and other such things. Here Scharf is eulogizing 1960s lo-tech; and his attitude seems to be gently loving—friendly. The problem is that he can't paint the damn things. He doesn't have even the small store of painting craft necessary to carry off this kind of deadpan amusement. When Magritte gently chides us, lightly spoofing bourgeois taste, he has the felicities of brushwork to let us in on the jokes—his pictorial elegance shows us that he has some distance on the material. Kenny Scharf isn't up to the Kodak Instamatic. It's often said that the problem with a lot of today's hot artists is that they're

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fresh out of art school. Maybe the problem is that they paint as if they've never gone to art school (which may amount to the same thing, considering what's going on in a lot of art schools).

Stephen Westfall. Contemporary abstract paintings built out of hard-edged constructivist forms are to be seen a good deal in the galleries. Much of this work is being done by younger artists—artists in their thirties and forties who can have had little or no direct contact with the earlier generations of constructivist artists and will know their work from museums, historical gallery shows, and books. Stephen Westfall, who used circular and rectangular forms in his show at Daniel Newburg in October, is one of the more visible of these artists, partly because he's written a good deal for the art magazines. Other shows of contemporary constructivism this fall included Andrew Spence at Barbara Toll in October and Michael Young at BlumHelman, also in October. All the work seeks to recall the cool assurance of constructivism from 1915 to 1965; the splendid "Contrasts of Form" show that was held at the Museum of Modern Art in 1985 may have been an influence on some of these artists. Malevich, Mondrian, Taeuber-Arp, Herbin, Kelly have had an impact, directly or indirectly. All in all, this new constructivism is a development of great interest; catchphrases like NeoGeo don't do it justice. The tradition being invoked is one of the great modern traditions—the pedigrees are impeccable. More than that, the new work is powered by an engaging mix of hi-tech cool and avant-gardist nostalgia.

The most interesting paintings in Westfall's show were a series of three vertical compositions, each divided into an irregular series of mostly rectangular areas by thick bands of black or yellow. In the past Westfall has done a number of paintings inspired by compositions of the American Myron Stout; the new Westfalls have a family resemblance to some Stout oils from 1950. The irregular network of straight lines, dividing the canvas into a community of separate and distinct compartments, is a convention with roots deep in Bauhaus and De Stijl that Stout, like Westfall, draws upon. Westfall—along with Andrew Spence and Harvey Quaytman (whose work was at the David McKee Gallery in September)—also seems interested in the later Mondrians, the ones where the lines take an increasingly aggressive role and sometimes become prison-like in their weight. Probably the eccentricity and even anti-classicism of some of the later Mondrians appeals now. In any event, a not inconsiderable store of great modernist ideas flows into the clean frontality of Westfall's images. He knows how to vary the intervals to spark attention and keep us looking. A single diagonal makes a special event, a difference within the similarities. The progress of a line from top to bottom is broken by a horizontal, detoured a bit. Westfall is an attentive, thoughtful artist. And yet the paintings lack a cumulative power—they're like exercises, dictionaries of possibilities. This is faceless painting.

The new constructivism has an odd history. Its beginnings are located in the early Eighties, when there was a rebellion against Neo-Expressionism. Initially, conceptually oriented artists were attracted by the large role that theory and polemic played in Bauhaus, De Stijl, and Russian Constructivist art. Constructivism seemed to offer an escape from emotionalism—or, at least, from bathos. Constructivism was seen as the ultimate in theory and cool. But as these younger artists really got involved in the painting process—either because they felt a lack in their own work or because they recognized a voluptuousness in classic constructivism which they hadn't seen at first—they began to want this art of hard edges and clear forms to be beautiful and emotionally compelling. The new abstraction, which a couple of years ago tended to be discussed "theoretically," is now meant to *move* us. Typical of this attitude is a press release from the Scott Hanson Gallery which speaks of an art that "forsakes the ersatz metaphysics of 'art theory' "—this from the

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very people who were touting theory a season ago. In the press release for Westfall's show we're told that "the work does not need to be defined as anything other than illuminatingly beautiful painting." This may seem self-evident, except that it's something that hasn't been heard too much in these here parts of late. I applaud this new attitude; but the artists don't seem to know quite how to make something that's—beautiful. Westfall's paint handling is perfunctory. When he gives us green areas with a red underpainting showing through he probably thinks that he's showing us sensitivity, feeling; to me the technique seems programmatic. Andrew Spence is the most convincing *painter* in this group; his flat, opaque surfaces have some density to them; his boomerang shapes have a certain force. Still, we're a long way from the distillation of painting craft and culture that gave the surfaces of the early constructivist paintings their resonance.

In a sense, NeoGeo is a form of neoclassicism. The problems that confront Stephen Westfall and Andrew Spence when they invoke Myron Stout or Mondrian may be rather like the problems that confront contemporary figurative neoclassicists such as Lennart Anderson and Milet Andrejevic when they invoke Poussin or Puvis. Namely, is the tradition alive enough to add on to? The constructivist vision of the early modernists was as much a product of a certain time and place as the neoclassical pastoral vision of Renaissance Europe. These visions have their life spans and their deaths and their resurrections. But resurrections can't be willed, except up to a point. To say that no matter how much Stephen Westfall wants to believe in that clean-lined constructivist world he can't really believe in it is to raise aesthetics to the level of metaphysics, but I'm not sure there's any other way to put it. The Donald Judd retrospective at the Whitney this fall showed us an artist who stands at the absolute end of the historical trajectory of constructivism. The most recent work in the Judd retrospective—a wall piece of thirty plywood boxes—is the same good old idea presented once more, with feeling. The moment may be wrong for a return to constructivism. Of course, it's only wrong until some artist proves it right. In any event, the dryness of Westfall's paintings goes beyond a painting problem. If one feels an intellectual vanity too much in his work it may be because the image before our eyes is the product of an idea that's dissociated from the period we're living in. Painting *is* alive and well. But artists formed in the Age of Conceptualism may be forever cut off from the sensuality of classic European abstraction.

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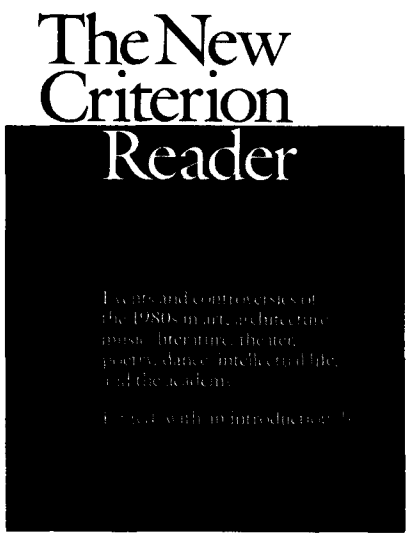

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Letter from Warsaw

The case of "Res Publica"

by Anne Applebaum

When the Polish authorities declared martial law in 1981, one third of the members of the Communist Party resigned. Members of the Artists' Union, Writers' Union, Journalists' Union, and Architects' Union were also faced with a simple choice: stay in and support the government, or quit. Most quit. Most, in fact, immediately joined boycotts of state-funded museums, galleries, newspapers, periodicals, and cultural institutions. Parallel institutions sprang up: art exhibitions in churches, underground newspapers, alternative theaters. A friend of mine, an art critic, remembers the immediate post-Solidarity era as one of clarity. "It was all very easy then. The lines were drawn, you knew who was who," he says, not without a certain nostalgia.

Seven years later, the political blacks and whites have turned disturbingly grey. Intellectuals of all types have drifted, not always gracefully, across the barriers which originally divided betrayers from betrayed. Some lost interest in toeing an "opposition line" more quickly than others, and the latter usually accused the former of collaboration. But as time goes by, and the political situation is no longer defined by the simple dichotomy between Solidarity and the government, it grows more difficult to distinguish the two sides. The artistic community has handled the problem quite rationally, by establishing a de facto system of gallery rankings. It is politically acceptable, for example, to show your paintings in the state-owned Foksal gallery, because its manager has maintained a reasonably good distance from the state. But the community looks askance at those who show in the state-owned Zacheta gallery, because its curators obligingly put on exhibitions of Polish military art when asked to do so. Private galleries, of which there are a handful, are subject to the same criterion.

The case of publications used to be even easier. Anything published officially was automatically suspect, since all decent journalists and editors quit official journals in 1981. With one or two exceptions, most notably the Catholic weekly *Tygodnik Powszechny*, the intellectual level of the official press sank so low that no one would write for it anyway. What to do, however, when one of the illegal journals applies, and receives, legal status? This was the situation that *Res Publica* magazine created in 1987, and the arguments over its decision to come up from the underground continue today.

Res Publica was born in the late 1970s, in the same era as most other opposition journals. The magazine was the brainchild of Marcin Krol, an intellectual historian who is best known as the chronicler of Polish conservative thought. (He denies that this interest reflects his own beliefs: "So many people write about the Left here. I just wanted to provide some balance.") Krol always conceived *Res Publica* as a kind of cultural antidote for the Polish obsession with politics. Its very name is a kind of pun,

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which echoes the name of a government newspaper, *Rzeczpospolita*: both mean "republic," but while the latter refers to the Polish People's Republic, founded in 1945, the former connotes the more universal, Latinate term for "commonwealth." The magazine's focus is art, literature, theater, music, the philosophy of ideas, and the contemporary Polish situation seen from a non-practical perspective. Krol says that *Res Publica* is "for people who are interested in the life of the mind . . . people who recognize that the geopolitical situation will not be changed within the next six months."

In 1985, when post-martial law Poland began to thaw once again, *Res Publica*'s editors realized that if the magazine was truly to de-politicize itself it would have to lose its illegal status. This idea was then a novelty in Poland—now, a whole roster of political and economic groups are applying for legality—but it fit in with a certain philosophy of reform. Don't continue breaking the laws, this philosophy goes; breathe some life back into them and give them meaning.

But when Krol's two-year battle to legalize *Res Publica* finally came to an end, he found that he had gained some unwanted supporters along the way. Because the government was then looking for friends in the intellectual community, *Res Publica*'s application was approved with the express assistance of the Ministry of Culture, and of government spokesman Jerzy Urban, who is a longtime confidant of General Jaruzelski. Some of Krol's former supporters became hostile. Urban is one of the most disliked men in Poland, and the Polish Ministry of Culture, which played a more significant role in the Stalinist era, is hardly a body one wants as a sponsor. Adam Michnik, one of Poland's leading political theorists, complained that *Res Publica*'s legality could only be accompanied by dishonesty. Did Krol really not care that his magazine would be censored? Did he really believe this would not effect the quality of the writing?

Krol persevered, and the magazine began printing twenty-five thousand copies per month, financed by donations, subscriptions, and extremely successful newsstand sales; Krol says he can count on the man who watches the cloakroom at the university library to sell at least one thousand copies. Traces of the censor did appear, always accompanied by a polite reference to the law governing the offending passage. Often these do very little to change the original meaning, as when a specific reference to the Hitler-Stalin pact of 1939 is excised from a long article dealing with Poles who migrated westward in the same year for obvious reasons, and replaced by dashes and a bureaucratic phrase indicating the applicable law.

Now, however, the critics have a new complaint. *Res Publica* is all very well, they say, but somehow it seems to have lost its relevance. Its appeal is rather narrow, rather elite. While social unrest threatens to tear the country apart, while the economy slides from bad to intolerable, *Res Publica* only manages to publish very nice theater reviews. An editor of one of the main underground newspapers told me she finally got fed up with how late it arrived and canceled her subscription. Besides, it was always lying around on someone's coffee table, she added, somewhat disparagingly.

Krol says he doesn't care. "If they say it's irrelevant, that's okay, that's good, that's what we want." Michal Komar, *Res Publica*'s literary editor, observes that Polish politics are like a mirror, with the government and the opposition often sounding frighteningly similar: "Solidarity propaganda is the child of Communist propaganda. We wanted to re-establish the language of the Polish liberal tradition, which not surprisingly sounds strange to untrained ears."

But there is a more serious side to these complaints about *Res Publica*. In Poland, elitism and irrelevance are serious accusations if the accuser implies that they add up to political neutrality. For years, the government has been trying to gain the support of intellectuals, particularly talented and popular writers, and it counts neutral intellectuals in its favor. In fact, anyone who

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doesn't directly oppose the Communist Party is considered an ally. In such an atmosphere, it is impossible to avoid choosing sides.

Yet it is even more impossible to avoid making a comment. Because the country has no political parties and no institutionalized way to express political dissent, so-called "independent" Polish intellectuals take on the role of elder statesmen. They are obliged to make statements during crises, and are expected to offer opinions on every major political development. *Res Publica*'s editors are simply too well known to withhold their opinions from the public, and indeed many Poles turn to the magazine in search of "independent" thoughts. In this situation, any real aloofness would be tantamount to switching allegiances in what is still essentially a two-sided battle. *Res Publica*'s critics worry that the magazine is straying too far in this direction, although its editors vehemently deny it. They cite their willingness to publish the opinions of activists like Professor Bronislaw Geremek, one of Lech Walesa's longtime advisors, and their continual focus on Poland's many historical controversies, including Polish-Jewish, Polish-Soviet, and Polish-German relations in the twentieth century.

Because of Poland's political polarization, the future of independent journals like *Res Publica* is still dependent on the development of other political associations and institutions, as well as other independent publications. If these get stronger, the pressure on the magazine will probably lessen. *Res Publica*'s voice will be one of many, rather than the sole legal beacon of independent thought. Complaints will then focus on the incompetence of its film critics, as they would anywhere else.

While *Res Publica*'s story makes a good allegory (moral: it is impossible to escape politics in Poland), its attempt to establish a thoroughly independent cultural sphere is not unique. Other Poles have gone to far more drastic measures. Zbigniew Makowski, a leading Polish painter, decided to cut himself off completely from the divisiveness of contemporary Poland, and has literally refused to leave his Warsaw apartment since martial law was declared in 1981. He periodically issues suitably abstract canvases to the outside world, but speaks to no one and allows no influences to reach him.

One of the most exciting Polish drama companies, the Gardzienice Theater, has fought politicization through actively seeking to re-establish links with prewar Poland. The group is based in a village in eastern Poland, where the actors live and work alongside the few remaining traditional peasant communities there. Using Old Slavonic liturgy and music, Polish-Ukrainian mythology, and an almost Artaudian "Theater of Life" style, the troop tries to give an avant-garde twist to traditional Central European themes.

The list of independent cultural actors could go on and on. With the possible exception of Hungary, Poland has the most diverse cultural and intellectual life in the socialist bloc. Stalinism never grew very deep roots in Poland, partly because the Poles hate the Russians so much, and partly because they hate each other. Successful totalitarianism requires cohesiveness on the part of the rulers, and fear on the part of the ruled. Poles, even Stalinist Poles, could never agree long enough to make their countrymen truly afraid. Systems designed to terrorize were and are constantly breaking down. Government officials participate openly in the black market, border guards wink at illegal photocopiers and computers, and secret police leak information to the opposition. Even when officials cared to enforce them, norms of social realism were simply ignored by artists and writers. Today, it rarely makes sense to talk about a "school" of Polish painters, for example. Individualism seems to be the only thing that the myriad of good Warsaw painters have in common.

In fact, the greatest danger to Polish culture now is not Communism but emigration. More than fifty percent of young Poles now say they want to leave the country

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in search of jobs and money. For the moment, many émigré Poles maintain tightly knit communities in Paris, Berlin, London, New York, or Chicago, the major centers for this new diaspora. But their fate will eventually be the same as for any travelling nation: assimilate or perish. It would be sadly ironic if the Poles, who held themselves together despite being divided between three empires for a century, who somehow lived through a war which destroyed a third of the population, who defied Communism more successfully than any other nation, who even now refuse to let the battle between the government and the opposition ruin their intellectual life, should finally be defeated by the lack of economic opportunity and the powerful lure of the West.

Forthcoming in *The New Criterion:*

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Collecting letters *by Gloria G. Fromm*
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Italo Svevo *by Joseph Epstein*
The "Collected" Philip Larkin *by Robert Richman*

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Books

Paris and the Impressionists

by Karen Wilkin

Impressionism used to be discussed as a movement that turned its back on high art's traditional subjects in order to give more attention to other matters. The Impressionists' themes, landscape, still life, and an updated, more or less non-anecdotal form of genre painting, were despised subjects, at the bottom of the Academy's hierarchy. While their contemporaries in the official Salons continued to exhibit historical narratives and evocations of classical mythology, the Impressionists preferred to record what they saw around them. Dispassionately. Clearly there was an Impressionist iconography of street scenes, cafés, theaters, and gardens, but the visual aspects of Impressionist motifs seemed more important than the motifs themselves. The complexity of a crowd on a boulevard, the multiplicity of windows, balconies, and shutters, the patterns of cabs, horses, and pedestrians seen from a distance—all were thought to be more significant than where the crowds were going or which boulevard was represented. When Impressionism was spoken of as the beginning of modernism, this dominance of the visual over the narrative was usually stressed. *Seeing*, rather than what was seen, was the key.

But in the past decade or so, art critics and art historians have become deeply suspicious of work that appears to address the eye first and foremost. While music is assumed (and permitted) to engage the whole being through the ear, painting and sculpture are, oddly, required to generate an immense amount of associative explanation or risk being dismissed as mindless. The more a painting or sculpture can be "explicated," the more specific texts and subtexts can be pointed to, the more serious it obviously is. This admits into discussion a lot of bad art. Conversely, a great deal of not altogether relevant baggage gets attached to some good art as proof that it is not "merely" visual.

No one disputes the quality of the best Impressionist painting or its historical importance, so it is not surprising that recent scholarship has set itself the task of restoring "meaning" to these familiar and admired images. What is surprising is the apparent need to downplay the importance of Impressionism's evident formal (for lack of a better word) inventiveness. The recent Degas retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum in New York was typical, with its emphasis on the psychological aspects of Degas's paintings and the minor role assigned to his emotionally neutral but plastically extraordinary sculptures.

A more useful and more challenging approach attempts to make Impressionist works intelligible to a twentieth-century audience by providing a context for them. And that is what *Impressionism: Art, Leisure, and Parisian Society*, Robert L. Herbert's ambitious and lavishly illustrated new book, sets out to do.[1]

1 *Impressionism: Art, Leisure, and Parisian Society*, by Robert L. Herbert; Yale University Press, 352 pages, $50.

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His intentions are admirable: "to show that impressionist paintings cannot be separated from the history of the events, places, persons, and social institutions they represent; indeed, that to talk only of 'style' or 'motif' is to diminish the true richness of art by limiting the extent of its domain." He is aware, he adds quickly, "that the paintings are not the results of some ineluctable social process, that paintings do not simply illustrate social history . . . . Painting is an inventive process that produces an imaginative result."

The result is a book chock-full of fascinating information, rich with interesting facts, that presents a vivid portrait of life a century ago in what must have been the most exciting city in the world. What is disturbing is that the art Herbert's scrupulous research ought to illuminate is indeed too often reduced to the role of illustration.

Robert Herbert, who is Robert Lehman Professor of the History of Art at Yale University, probably knows more about nineteenth-century Paris than most Parisians did a hundred years ago. He can make Haussmann's modernizations of the medieval city seem current and dramatic. He can make you understand the impact of vast new public parks on a population once restricted to brief visits to a few private gardens. He can tell you where all the painters and writers lived and worked, where they went to amuse themselves, what you could see from whose window, and what traffic was like in the Bois de Bologne. Herbert views Paris through the eyes of a *fin de siècle* resident. I suspect that he could walk through the much worked-over Fourteenth Arrondissement of 1989, past the hideous blot of the Tour Montparnasse and the bombastic, modish apartment houses by Ricardo Bofill that interrupt the Rue Vercingetorix, and not see any of it. Instead, the vanished street patterns and working-class houses and shops that once defined the neighborhood would be visible to him.

Herbert has apparently read everything—newspapers, novels, letters, diaries, guidebooks (although not art reviews, because he believes them to address too narrow a public)—and his knowledge of the life of nineteenth-century Paris is astonishing. He knows the intricacies of its class structure, the nuances of relationships between independent young shopgirls and prosperous middle-aged men, the intimacies of a dancer's or a waitress's life, the differences between working-class and middle-class leisure. He can make a convincing case that the *flaneur*—"the purposeful male stroller"—was not an idler but an active observer.

Herbert filters the work of Monet, Manet, Degas, Renoir, and their colleagues through his impressive knowledge of the period. At best, the results are illuminating. They could even help jaded viewers in the late 1980s see well-known pictures freshly, even, perhaps, help them to see Impressionist works somewhat as they appeared in their own time. Obviously, we can never hope to recapture the way Impressionist color, touch, and drawing once affected an audience whose values were shaped by the Salons, but Herbert convinces us that understanding Impressionist subject matter more deeply makes the paintings more legible.

Subject matter, for Herbert, is crucial: he is as aware of what has been omitted as he is of what has been selected. He describes the Impressionists as "the first generation of modernists to deal principally with contemporary life," but notes that they ignored the evidence of dramatic social upheaval in the increasingly industrialized, urbanized France they inhabited. They rejected, as well, the world of peasants and farmers painted by their immediate predecessors, preferring, as Herbert puts it, to paint "leisure, not labor." For the most part, Herbert suggests, the Impressionists chose as their subject a narrow world of civilized urban pursuits: the middle class in town, in nature, and as tourists; in short, the middle class at leisure. Why they did so fascinates him. It seems to him the key to Impressionist painting. More than how their works are made, the

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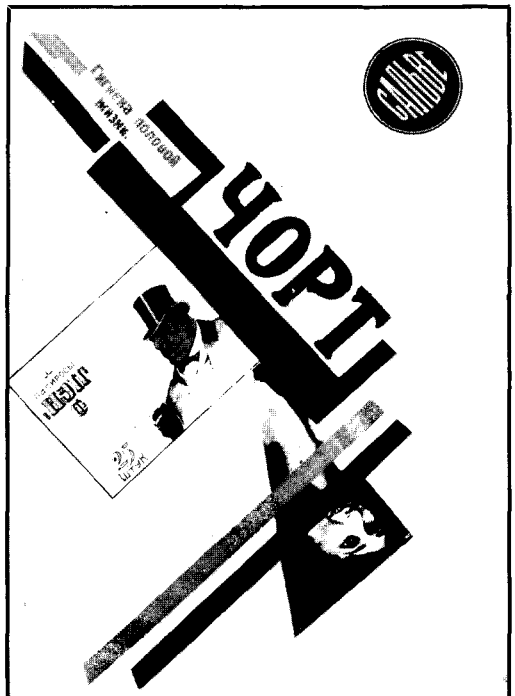
Impressionists' choice of subject appears to Herbert as *the* indicator of their modernism:

> As the reader will discover, I am convinced that Impressionism's place as the foundation of early modern art is closely allied with the significance in modern urban culture of cafés, outdoor concerts, theater, vaudeville, dances, picnics, swimming, boating, suburban outings, and seashore vacations. It is not just that Degas, Manet, and Monet looked forward to twentieth-century artists because of their style, it is also that popular songs and suburban leisure have loomed ever larger in modern culture. The proportion of time now given over to all aspects of leisure and entertainment, including its electronic forms, now rivals work time, and to study Impressionism is to reveal the origins of this singular phenomenon.

To support his thesis, Herbert focuses on the mid-1860s through the 1880s and concentrates on pictures of what Baudelaire described as "modern life" painted during these years. He includes scenes of streets and cafés, parks and theaters, race tracks and beaches. Absent are landscapes, still lifes, most portraits, unpopulated gardens, even lily ponds and haystacks, and the painters of these themes, such as Pissarro and Sisley, receive little mention; Cézanne is entirely excluded. Herbert scrutinizes his carefully selected images and reads them as he would any other documents of the time, as encapsulations of social history.

At times Herbert's exhaustive questioning of a picture can be surprising and enriching. The long discussion of Manet's *Masked Ball at the Opera*, 1873, in the collection of the National Gallery, Washington, is part of a chapter entitled "Theater, Opera, and Dance." In it, Herbert examines what must be every aspect of the relation between performers and audience, both in public and backstage. He contrasts dance as spectacle—the ballet, performed at the Opera—with dance as recreation, drawing distinctions between how people behaved at the popular dance halls and at society events such as the Opera Ball that forms the subject of Manet's painting.



Varvara Stepanova, *Untitled Collage*, 1930

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The roles of men and women, the relationship between the sexes at various levels of society, are pervasive themes in this chapter and are summed up, to some extent, by Herbert's discussion of *Masked Ball at the Opera*. He calls our attention to the acute differences among the few women depicted. The cloaked, masked society women on the right, for example, seem guarded by the men closest to them, an impression reinforced by the way the women's black capes are subsumed by the dark mass of men in evening clothes. The exotically costumed young women at the left, with their daringly exposed legs, and the costumed woman engulfed by a male admirer's cloak on the right, are clearly at the ball for reasons other than simple entertainment. Herbert stresses the eroticism of the event by citing contemporary accounts and reinforces these observations by his analysis of the picture. The dangling legs at the top of the picture, for example, take on a new, charged relationship with the stockinged legs of the women in the foreground; Herbert stresses the reductive, dehumanizing quality of the image. For him, the painting is not only a stunning arrangement of shimmering darks, punctuated by small notes of color, but a graph of possible male and female connections in a particular kind of public place, at a particular time. Yet anecdote does not take precedence over art. His formal analysis keeps pace with his other perceptions:

> At the heart of the picture's inner workings is the opposition of the mass of black-clad men and the bright accents of Polchinelle and the costumed women: the coolest versus the warmest, the soberest versus the most animated. The thickset horizontal of the men's hats appears all the flatter because of the parallel sweeps of the balcony overhead.

Yet other discussions in the book are equivocal or less convincing. The chief difficulty is Herbert's intense literal-mindedness. He approaches each picture as though it were an absolutely accurate transcription of a particular moment and interrogates every inch of the canvas as though it were indisputable fact. Of course, he knows better and occasionally says so, but the overwhelming impression is of art's being treated as reportage. Herbert often seems obsessed by a wish to explain *exactly* what the relationship is between the figures in a painting and why each one looks as he or she does. He speculates about what led up to the moment depicted and what will happen next.

Sometimes this can verge on silliness. In discussing Mary Cassatt's *Cup of Tea*, 1880, in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, Herbert notes that both women depicted, the one drinking from her cup and the one leaning back and resting her hand on her face, look to the right. Since there are only two cups visible, he concludes they are alone. Herbert wonders why they don't look at each other or appear to be talking. "Perhaps some little household incident has drawn their attention, but it is equally likely that they have simply come to the end of conversation." So much for painting as "an inventive process that produces an imaginative result."

The Cassatt example is admittedly extreme but all too often in the book fact and speculation all but exclude other considerations. We are given a virtual blueprint of the establishment known as the Folies-Bergère, the setting of Manet's celebrated painting of a barmaid, 1881-82, in the collection of the Courtauld Institute. Herbert makes much of what he perceives as Manet's attitude toward the woman behind the bar, saying that she has been accorded a great deal of dignity in spite of her less than dignified position in life, that Manet has painted her as thoughtful, self-contained, isolated. He spends little time, however, on what many of us regard as the most remarkable aspect of the painting: its willful dislocation of appearances. The painting is fundamentally irrational in a way that resists Herbert's efforts to explain everything literally. Even if you know exactly which part of which balcony the bar was located on, even if you know precisely what was performed at the Folies-Bergère and who was likely to attend,

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the reflections in Manet's mirror fail to make literal sense. It is not carelessness on Manet's part but his deliberate refusal to record mere appearance that makes it impossible to rationalize the positions of bottles, oranges, and customer, even of the barmaid herself, with the images in the fictive painted mirror. In the end, the painting is not about barmaids or places of entertainment but about seeing, about perception itself.

At other times, Herbert's suggested narrative can alter the way you look at a picture. Since he can penetrate the meanings of costume as astutely as any fashion editor, and since he can tell which boulevard is alluded to by a blur of passing figures and a row of streetlights, Herbert can tell immediately that the women in Degas's little picture *Woman on a Café Terrace, Evening*, 1877, in the Musée d'Orsay, are prostitutes on the Boulevard Montparnasse, available to the crowd of male passersby in the background. Herbert conjectures that there is some sort of commerce between the woman who rises from her seat in the foreground and the silhouetted form of a man moving out of the picture to the right; the implied connection between them, he suggests, is echoed by the visual tension between the two figures, who move in opposite directions. He calls our attention to how frequently Degas depicted "the male pursuer" as a dark, partial presence, which makes us look again at the peripheral figures in other café and ballet scenes. Herbert comments: "Of course, we cannot insist on a knowing exchange between Degas's two figures, but the presence of a male passer-by is an essential element of this pastel. Degas makes us into an investigator, seated on that terrace, sizing up various clues in order to understand what is going on around us . . . ."

This is all very good. But then, in the next sentence, he adds: "We then realize why Degas once defined his art in these terms: 'A painting is a thing which requires as much trickery, malice, and vice as the perpetuation of a crime; make counterfeits and add a touch of nature.' " It's a marvelous quote, but apart from the word "vice," what does it have to do with the ideas that preceded it? The formal implications of Degas's statement are overlooked and the artist's declaration of the unlikeness of nature and art is turned into a recipe. Ironically, the picture itself makes the point better than the text. The scene that Herbert interprets so matter-of-factly and, on most levels, informatively, has been rendered with extreme "trickery." The women are a fragmented frieze, the space they occupy implied economically by the angles of chair backs; the boulevard and its crowds are an abstract blur of dark and light. The whole is knit together by three astonishing pale vertical bars, presumably justified by the café façade but, in fact, radical, bold strokes typical of Degas at his most inventive and probably more startling to Parisian audiences of the time than his seamy subject matter.

Obviously Herbert is capable of trenchant observations. But his passion for small details of fact—the passion that makes him such a fine historian and makes this book ultimately so informative—can occasionally overwhelm common sense. He painstakingly identifies the drink of the slovenly man in Degas's *Absinthe*, 1876, in the Musée d'Orsay. While the despondent-looking woman slumped on the banquette, feet inelegantly apart, has a glass of the cloudy green liqueur that gives the painting its name, her companion has a tall glass, set on a saucer, of something dark brown. This, Herbert tells us, is a "mazagran," cold black coffee and seltzer taken as a hangover remedy. The identifications are part of a comprehensive description of the horrors of absinthe—a working-class drink whose dangers were recognized even when Degas painted his canvas—and are used to support the purposelessness that Herbert sees in the subject. On the following page, however, Herbert points to an *identical* glass and saucer, this time with a spoon in the glass, in Manet's *Corner in a Café-Concert*, 1878-79, in the National Gallery, London. This drink is placed in front of a vigorous man in "worker's smock, cap, and clay pipe."

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Herbert reinforces this identification by pointing out that "the purplish tones of his drink suggest wine, the traditional drink of the Parisian worker." What about the recherché hangover cure of a page ago, identified by what appears to be the same image?

A similar case of overzealous interpretation affects an otherwise fascinating discussion of a series of paintings by Degas of the rehearsal hall of the Paris Opera ballet. The balletmaster and choreographer, Jules Perrot, appears many times in the paintings and in a series of drawings. Herbert describes an image of Perrot, once the most celebrated male dancer in the world, during the Romantic Era: "a sympathetic and nearly tragic figure looking older than his sixty-five years, with bandy legs spread as though to indicate his inability to dance." Has Herbert ever heard of turnout? If anything, Perrot's position suggests that he is still reasonably flexible, after a lifetime of turning his legs out from the hip to assume ballet's classic positions.

Herbert has an irritating habit of quantifying pictures. A discussion of one of Monet's luminous views across Paris elicits this: "The sky, taking up two fifths of the surface of the canvas, establishes the moist, grey light so typical of the Parisian basin." And a little later, "Approximately four fifths of [the painting's] area represents sky, tree, foliage, and the garden." He is capable of counting the number of figures, however summarily rendered, in a crowded scene and attaching importance both to the total and to the relation of each spot and dot making up the figures, not as touches of paint in a painted context but as members of a complex social network.

Further quibbles. While the illustrations are plentiful, generally accurate, and placed so that text and image are readily related, the lack of dimensions in the captions is annoying. The many details allow us to see exactly what Herbert is discussing, but it is difficult to know the relation of these details to the real size of the paintings. Admittedly, the pictures are familiar ones and there is a detailed list of captions with measurements at the front of the book—there is a useful chronology as well—but it is frustrating to have to keep flipping back to verify sizes. Dimensions are given only in centimeters, which seems slightly affected in a book published in New Haven and London. And why, since it is "Impressionism" throughout the book, is it always "impressionist"? Herbert's oddest mannerism is an occasional use of female pronouns to refer to the viewer, an effort, he tells us, to avoid the sexism of always using "he" to indicate a person of either sex.

The obvious comparison to be made is with John Rewald's definitive works on Impressionism and Post-Impressionism, and Herbert's book falls short. It lacks the exhaustive information about the artists and the art itself, for all its details about the period. But *Impressionism: Art, Leisure, and Parisian Society* is mercifully clear, free of jargon, readable, and—for all its fashionable approach—relatively non-polemical. I suspect that it will quickly become a standard for general reader and informed undergraduate alike. I hope that it will send them back to the works themselves. Context, particularly Herbert's sharply defined context, isn't everything.

Piccadilly's Scheherazade

Salman Rushdie The Satanic Verses. Viking, 547 pages, $19.95

reviewed by David Gurewich

Although the banning of books has a long history, the West, apart from the sordid Hitler decade, has not been active in that field for some time. The number of books banned in the West in this century has been so low as to make each of them a cause célèbre: *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, *Tropic of Cancer*, *Lolita*. Yet each of these was officially deemed an affront on moral grounds (sexual, to be precise), not political ones.

In the Third World, the situation is quite

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different: Third World countries are as serious about their politics as we once were about our sex lives. This has been brought home to us again recently by the act of the Indian government banning Salman Rushdie's new novel, *The Satanic Verses*, for its unflattering picture of Islam. I don't wish to blame the Indian government out of hand. The world's largest (and most flawed) democracy has been racked with so much communal violence that it is too easy for us in the West to invoke the First Amendment. When was the last time a Greyhound bus was blown up and its passengers gunned down? Still, banning a book hardly serves the cause of democracy in the long run.

Although *The Satanic Verses* won Britain's prestigious Whitbread Prize, it is the banning that propelled it from the book-review section of the newspaper to the front page. (Viking, the book's American publisher, has received a few bomb threats, and a number of scheduled readings by Rushdie have been canceled.) But there is so much more to *The Satanic Verses* than the bashing of Islam: the tireless search for identity (especially by Indians in England); the striving for creative freedom, in both religious and artistic terms; the struggle to define and redefine conflicts of madness and sanity, of reality and dreams. Thematically, there is enough here to fill a bookshelf of Vintage paperbacks.

Salman Rushdie is known mainly for his two novels—*Midnight's Children*, a multi-character saga of his generation of Indians born on the eve of independence, and *Shame*, a merciless roman à clef of Indo-Pakistan strife. In *The Satanic Verses*, he builds on the foundation of these novels and, using Bombay and London as twin bases, creates a maelstrom of a narrative that pulls characters, cities, arts, and doctrines into its maw. Since he has an opinion on all things under the sun, *The Satanic Verses* is really The World According to Rushdie.

The narrative is both simple and complex, as it charts the lives of its protagonists, two Indian-born actors, Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha. We learn in flashbacks that Gibreel started out as a lunch carrier in the Bombay slums and became a film star via "theologicals," religious movies in which he played various Hindu gods; Saladin grew up in a rich Bombay family and ended up in the glitzy world of London advertising, where he made a killing as a token Indian character in *The Aliens Show*, as well as a voice-over in thousands of commercials. Their lives soar and dive, run parallel, and intersect violently. At times they seem to reflect each other, mirror-like, suggesting facile conclusions. But each time they seem to be acting from obvious antipodes, Rushdie pulls out one of his myriad subplots and blows it up—*gotcha*! This isn't your *Cain and Abel* mini-series stuff.

As the book opens, the two actors are floating in the air over the English Channel. In fact, they are falling to their deaths out of a plane exploded by terrorists. But don't expect a book-long Márquesian fall, with the two safely reminiscing on their lives. Although they "survive," they are changed (I dare you to survive a fall like this *un*changed). Precisely, they are changed into an angel and a demon, who head for the whirlwind of modern-day London.

Saladin's lifelong adoration for things British and disdain for things Indian are put to a test, as he is cast, complete with horns and hoofs, into the nightmare of hospitals and jails. He is forced to seek refuge among his compatriots, a milieu that he used to scorn as intensely as he adored his adoptive British one, which included a radical-chic high-born blonde wife and a five-story mansion in Notting Hill. Gibreel, on the other hand, intermittently gets a halo and the messianic visions to go with it: of Ayesha, a butterfly-crowned orphan who leads her village on a *haj*, or pilgrimage, through the Arabian Sea; of a radical Imam who takes over the imaginary country of Desh; and, finally, of Mahound the Prophet, who gets the Word of God from the Angel Gabriel and calls it *quran*. Does this last one sound familiar? (It certainly did to the followers of Mohammed.) We're not sure whether these are Gibreel's visions—or someone else's—

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until they shatter his movie-star insouciance and send him on his own quest through London, trumpet in hand. I am describing this on a 1:1000 scale—Rushdie's twelve-cylinder imagination never idles; it roars in overdrive, cranking out subplot after subplot, story after story—a modernist *Arabian Nights*.

Some of these are told more than once—sometimes by switching among the characters' points of view, *Rashomon*-style, sometimes by switching the ethnic perspective and making a point-blank comparison of British and Indian cultures. Rushdie writes with a lust for creative excess, throwing every ingredient on hand into his boiling pot. He especially enjoys the clever (and deliciously confusing) interplay of reality and dreams. If sometimes, toward the end, he explicitly writes, "Gibreel dreamed," I suspect it is a result of editorial pressure, conceded after much teeth-gnashing by the author.

Rushdie keeps his tongue firmly in cheek, giving no quarter or respect. He writes mean, funny, lightning-quick dialogue, generously spiced with a peculiar Indian-English brand of sarcasm. Saladin, for instance, wages an endless argument about India's soul—and stomach—with his Indian girlfriend. When he links vegetarianism to cannibalism, she slyly replies, "We are a nation of vegetarians; ours is a peaceful, mystical culture, everybody knows."

To top his constant genre-juggling and dogged determination to saturate each situation with every possible symbol and cultural reference, Rushdie plays nonstop games with proper names. Some of them are just for fun: Saladin's wife is named Pamela Lovelace (cf. Richardson); radical lawyer *Hanif* Johnson and Ms. *Qureishi* in Gibreel's dreams form the name of Rushdie's fellow Indian writer (the screenwriter for *My Beautiful Laundrette*); on Saladin's show, a character named Ridley is obsessed with Sigourney Weaver (*Ridley* Scott directed Miss Weaver in *Alien*). I may be looking at the tip of an iceberg, and an Indian scholar, or an insider to London's cultural scene, could probably come up with ten times more wordplay and assorted *clefs*. But some of it is more serious and has more to do with Rushdie's views on art, faith, and reality than with inside jokes: the scribe of Mahound the Prophet has a dream in which he is Angel Gibreel and decides to test the Prophet by changing the words in the rules that he is diligently writing down. The scribe's name is *Salman*. Try not to get dizzy here: Character as Writer has a dream of being another Character and then distorts the words of this second Character in the latter's dream.

If this sounds like a lot of work for a serious reader, on the order of Milorad Pavic's recent *Dictionary of the Khazars*, a dizzying "postmodern" novel of symbols and signs, it need not be. While Pavic's book, spoofing literary and historical theories, becomes cerebrally dry in the process, Rushdie's games with people and ideas are visceral as well, adding to the fun. If you don't feel like doing puzzles, you can simply trust the author and go along with the story—an option that many other "intellectual" novels do not provide.

As for the defenders of the Koran who so objected to *The Satanic Verses*, it is safe to assume that most of them never read the book. Rushdie's wicked tongue and his characters' incessant drinking and copulating should have offended the devout long before they got to the religious satire. The phrase "satanic verses" refers primarily to Salman the scribe's above-mentioned distortion of the works of the Prophet, but on another occasion Rushdie uses it to describe Mahound's early remarks when he is forced by the polytheistic city fathers to accept three other gods as junior partners to *Al-Lah* (he repents later). And, finally, Saladin uses his voice-mimicking ability to revenge Gibreel's earlier treachery; he reads lewd ditties ("verses") to Gibreel's girlfriend over the phone, leading to their breakup.

Clearly, more is involved here than plain blasphemy. First, Rushdie gives equal lack of respect to all icons. Why shouldn't the British take umbrage at Saladin's erotic

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dreams about the Queen? Second, is it faith that the writer mocks, or fanaticism? Here he describes the victorious return of the Imam to the land of Desh: "as the people march through the [palace] gates," the Imam grows monstrous, and "swallows them whole . . . . Every clock in the city begins to chime, and goes on unceasingly, beyond twelve, beyond twenty-four, beyond one thousand and one, announcing the end of Time, the hour that is beyond measuring, the hour of the exile's return . . . of the commencement of the Untime of the Imam." In another dream, Salman the scribe describes Mahound's years in the desert: "Gibreel appeared to the Prophet and found himself spouting rules, rules, rules, until the faithful could scarcely bear the prospect of any more revelation . . . rules about every damn thing, if a man farts let him turn his face to the wind, a rule about which hand to use for the purpose of cleaning one's behind. It was as if no aspect of human existence was to be left unregulated, free." Clearly, Rushdie's attitude toward religion is more sophisticated than that of your standard opium-of-the-masses atheist.

It is but one step here to what Rushdie finds the most repulsive aspect of fanaticism: its deadset opposition to creative freedom. When victorious Mahound returns from the desert, Baal the poet (Rushdie must be allergic to non-symbolic names), who earlier followed the official line and taunted the prophet with his own "satanic verses," goes into hiding at a brothel. There he acts as a husband to twelve prostitutes, who adopt the names of Mahound's twelve wives. Finally Mahound shuts down the place and orders the girls executed. At the trial, Baal tells of his days in the brothel. Although he is dead serious, the crowd, knowing him as a popular satirist, starts weeping with laughter. Mahound is not amused. He reminds Baal of the latter's past mockery. "Once again you succeed in bringing the worst out of the people." As Baal is dragged away to be executed, he shouts: "Whores and writers, Mahound. We are the people you can't forgive." Mahound replies, "Writers and whores. I see no difference here."

This view of an artist has a typically modernistic self-abasing touch (in the nineteenth century, Pushkin saw the poet as a noble prophet), but Rushdie's position on creative freedom is quite clear. It is important to bear this in mind when looking at his politics, which, although unambiguously left of center, are paper-thin and dismissible across the political spectrum. He wrote *The Jaguar's Smile*, a trendy account of his *haj* to Nicaragua, the liberal Mecca of the Eighties, and in his description of the racially divided London he follows the semi-nihilistic, Marxist-yuppie line that was recently on display in the movie *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (written by the aforementioned Hanif Kureishi). He also makes some throwaway criticism of American immigration laws, that I, as an émigré, found quite unfair.

But I am not calling in bomb threats. In fact, the several salvos Rushdie levels at radical chic seem more scathing than his ho-hum anti-Americanism. More tellingly, his vision of his fellow Indians, both on their home turf and in Britain, is devoid of any false pathos. He is just as uncompromising as V. S. Naipaul, and, to me, more appealing. Where Naipaul tends to over-intellectualize, Rushdie lets go, and behind his mask of constant mockery one can feel the painful search for a "hyphenated" identity. At the end of the book, the mask drops altogether when Saladin comes to see his dying father, who humiliated him for years. The reconciliation at death's threshold is done in unsentimental, chillingly heartrending prose.

Whatever problems Rushdie tackles, he is first and foremost a writer. Anyone who wants to take him to task for blasphemy, for slighting Indian politics, or for unfavorably comparing American immigration policy to that of the British will find him an easy target. His very desire to throw in *everything*, his youthful bubbliness, his beguiling lack of discipline, make him vulnerable to plenty of charges, both political and aesthetic ones. This vulnerability may be deliberate: it is

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Salman-the-scribe-the-artist's duty to write "satanic verses"—that is, to butt in between man and God, and expose himself bravely to his accusers.

But Rushdie also wants to be considered a serious writer, and if he wants this appellation, he can have it anytime. Yet he seems to be of divided mind as to what a serious writer is. Toward the end of the book, he throws in some heavy-handed ponderings on good and evil, as if he were afraid that his irresistible protagonists are *too* lively, and insufficiently symbolic. By then, however, the reader is happily exhausted by the writer's wild flights of fantasy, and can safely skip the clumsy attempt at "bottom-lining."

I hope Rushdie gains more self-confidence without falling into ponderousness, and arrives at a perfect formula for his madness without sacrificing any of his energy. Even with its flaws, *The Satanic Verses* is a rich, satisfying seven-course meal of a book; returning from it to modern American prose is like going on a diet.

A classicist on the couch

Sandra J. Peacock *Jane Ellen Harrison: The Mask and the Self.* Yale University Press, 283 pages, $27.50

reviewed by Roger Kimball

Although the Victorian classicist Jane Ellen Harrison has now pretty much faded into that limbo populated by authors whose work is occasionally cited but not much discussed or read, it was not so long ago that she was a staple in any serious liberal arts diet. Indeed, until the 1950s Harrison was a vivid and controversial intellectual presence both in this country and in England, particularly among writers (Yeats and D. H. Lawrence are among those who acknowledged her influence) and literary critics of certain "advanced" tastes. And since almost any literary reputation—particularly that of a female writer—is a candidate for academic rehabilitation these days, it is hardly surprising that so substantial a figure as Jane Harrison should now be undergoing the first stages of reconstruction and reclamation.

In this new biography, Sandra J. Peacock, assistant dean of the graduate school at Emory University, serves up a psychoanalytic portrait of the classicist that manages to combine a heavy dose of Freudian analysis with all the current clichés about a woman struggling in a man's world. Being naturally cautious about such matters, I won't say that this is the very worst biography I have read in the last several years; but there can be no doubt that it belongs high on the short list for that prize.

Jane Harrison, the third of three daughters from her father's first marriage, was born in Yorkshire in 1850 to a reasonably prosperous merchant family. Her mother died of puerperal fever a month after giving birth. Five years later, her father married Gemimi Meredith, the sternly evangelical Welsh governess whom he had engaged a short time before. Harrison showed a marked aptitude and passion for languages from an early age and was among the first women to be educated at Cambridge University. She matriculated at Newnham College in 1874, two years after the women's college opened its doors, taking—to her lifelong regret—a second in the classical tripos in 1879.

After spending a term teaching Latin, Harrison went to London, where she devoted almost twenty years to studying, lecturing, and writing at the British Museum, and travelling abroad whenever she could. During this time she flirted with the aesthetic movement and met many leading figures of the day, from Henry James—whom she described as an "ingenious spider"—to that "vain old thing," Alfred, Lord Tennyson. In 1898, Harrison returned to Newnham College after winning a fellowship, remaining at Cambridge until she retired in 1922. Immediately after retiring, she went to live in Paris. She returned to London in 1926. Though she suffered from an impressive battery of "nervous complaints" at least from adoles-

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cence—headaches, shortness of breath, fainting spells, even bouts of blindness—she lived on until 1928, dying of leukemia five months shy of her seventy-eighth birthday.

In addition to being among the first women to enjoy a Cambridge education, Harrison was also part of the first generation of classical scholars to draw upon the fledgling discipline of anthropology and the unplumbed archeological evidence of vase paintings, inscriptions, and funerary art in her search for the origin and significance of Greek religion. While her early works on Greek art and mythology were quite conventional, her best known books, formidably titled *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (1903)—at almost seven hundred pages, a weighty prolegomenon indeed—and *Themis: A Study of the Social Origins of Greek Religion* (1912), were instrumental in overturning the received view of classical Greece as the serene citadel of lofty rationality and unruffled aesthetic perfection. As Harrison's younger Oxford colleague and spiritual ally Gilbert Murray noted, "It would be hard to overestimate the effect on the whole study of Greek religion of the first chapters of the *Prolegomena* . . . . They showed once for all how the base of any sound study of Greek religion must no longer be the fictional, largely artificial figures of the Olympian gods but the actual rites in which religion expressed itself and, so far as we can divine them, the implications of those rites." Looking behind the glittering pantheon of the Olympian deities to the dark, elemental rituals out of which they arose, Harrison helped to provide a new appreciation of the place of ritual and of the irrational in the formation of Greek religion and the classical Greek ethos.

Of course, Harrison was not alone in perceiving the importance of ritual and the irrational in the origins of Greek myth. As Professor Peacock points out, contemporary influences on her work include the Swiss scholar Johann Bachofen, who had published, in 1861, his famous speculations on matriliny and matriarchy in "organic" primitive societies, and Nietzsche, whose description of the Dionysian origins of Greek tragedy and critique of "Socratic" rationalism in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) were custom-made to appeal to Harrison. Then, too, many other scholars had been led by new archeological evidence to realize that often savage, orgiastic communal rituals stood at the origin of much Greek mythology—"myths cruel, puerile, obscene," as one scholar put it, "like the fancies of the savage mythmakers from which they sprang." In anthropology, perhaps the greatest figure popularizing such insights was James G. Frazer, whose multi-volume study *The Golden Bough* had begun to appear in 1890. This monumental exploration of the fertility cults in the Near East revolutionized scholarly understanding of mythology. And while Frazer himself remained skeptical of Harrison and her circle, his work in comparative mythology exerted an enormous influence on her and her colleagues (as well as on many others). Harrison recalled in her late autobiographical sketch, *Reminiscences of a Student's Life* (published in 1925 by the Hogarth Press), that "at the mere sound of the magical words 'Golden Bough' the scales fell—we heard and understood."

Yet, among British scholars anyway, Harrison was unusual in that she not only recognized but *championed* the chthonic, ritualistic origins of Greek myth as a source of emotional richness and immediacy that she believed later, more rationalistic ages—Victorian Britain no less than fifth-century Athens—had neglected to their diminishment. For her, as Frank Turner observes in his encyclopedic overview, *The Greek Heritage in Victorian Britain* (1981), "rationalism and propriety were incommensurable with the full expression and realization of the human spirit." In her quest for the essence of the religious impulse, Harrison turned away from the idealized image of the Olympian gods embodied in the canon of Greek literature toward the cult of Orpheus and the ritual festivals commemorated in vase paintings, sculptures, and other ancient artifacts. Thus she announces near the end

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of the *Prolegomena* that "the religion of Orpheus *is* religious in the sense that it is the worship of the real mysteries of life; . . . [I]t is the worship of life itself in its supreme mysteries of ecstasy and love." And in *Themis*, she disparagingly compares the gods of Olympus to "a bouquet of cut-flowers whose bloom is brief, because they have been severed from their roots." It was in this context that Gilbert Murray observed that Harrison had made the word "'Olympian' almost a term of reproach." Though late in life she regretted her "intemperate" antipathy to the Olympians, she never ceased to regard the Olympian gods and the rationalism they represented as highly artificial creations, out of touch with the deepest human concerns.

To some extent, it was novelty that formed the foundation of the appeal of Harrison's work among her contemporaries. She wrote with a pathos and engagement rare among her academic peers, and her whole approach to the classics—for those susceptible to its spell—seemed to open up new worlds of thought and feeling. Today, when every junior professor sitting down to write an article taxes his readers with endless agonizing over his critical "methodology" (the more radical the better) and when *any* subject is deemed fit for academic scrutiny, it may be difficult to appreciate how fresh and original Harrison's turn to anthropology and her brief for ritual seemed at the time. When in the opening pages of the *Prolegomena* she argued that "what a people *does* in relation to its gods must always be one clue, and perhaps the safest, to what it thinks," she was not simply asking that her colleagues entertain an alternative perspective of the nature of Greek religion: she was challenging the entire basis of traditional classical studies, which until then had been firmly grounded in textual analysis.

Perhaps the most important effect of Harrison's approach was a downgrading of the place of literature in the study of antiquity. "Literature as a starting-point for my investigation," she wrote in her preface to the *Prolegomena*, "I am compelled to disallow; yet literature is really my goal." How close she ever came to that goal is a matter of dispute. Especially in her later work, it often seems as if Harrison's chief interest in Greek religion is as a source of corroborating evidence for her own ideas about social psychology and the way society should be structured. Her fascination with the specifically social origins of Greek religion—and of the religious impulse generally—became more pronounced in her later work as she came under the sway of Henri Bergson's philosophy and Emile Durkheim's sociological theories. Durkheim's contention that religion had its origins in collective thought and feeling proved particularly attractive to her. In *Themis*, in which she propounds a sociological theory under the guise of analyzing the recently discovered Hymn of the Kouretes, Harrison develops the notion that religious group identity arose in ancient matrilineal societies that were dissolved with the later triumph of patrilineal (and patriarchal) society and its enshrinement in the pantheon of the Olympian gods. In this respect, at least, her work may be seen as a precursor to those contemporary academic theories that deliberately eschew the *literary* study of literature for the sake of sundry methods and insights drawn from the social sciences. Nevertheless, however controversial it was at the time, Harrison's mature work breathed new life into classical studies and provided inspiration for scholars, critics, and writers for decades.

Along with inspiration came a fair measure of personal devotion and notoriety. Typical of the former are Gilbert Murray's acknowledging his "great and obvious" debt to "Miss Harrison" in the preface to his classic study *Five Stages of Greek Religion* and the dedication that the philosopher Francis Cornford—another of Harrison's younger colleagues and for many years her intimate friend at Cambridge—provided for his *Thucydides Mythistoricus*, a book, he wrote, that was "a dream which but for her help and understanding would have gone up in

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smoke." After the *Prolegomena* appeared, Harrison became something of a figure in Oxbridge intellectual society, a position attested to as much by the often violent attacks on her work from conventional scholars as by the multitudinous testimonials from students and disciples.

A 1909 portrait of Harrison by Augustus John depicts its subject in late middle age, lounging back on a long chair amid an abundance of pillows, a heavy red tome resting closed on her lap. Swathed in a lacy black dress and a kind of flowing robe in her favorite blue-green color, she is staring off into space with weary concentration, her right hand tensely gripping the arm of the chair. The portrait strikes one as a study in overwrought melancholy. Nothing we know of her character contradicts that impression, though it is worth noting that Harrison was also said to have been capable of infectious charm and ebullience. Bertrand Russell once wrote in his journal that she was "envied for her power of enduring excess in whiskey and cigarettes." The latter was an especially daring habit for a proper Edwardian lady—though one might of course wonder if a Cambridge bluestocking could ever be accounted a proper Edwardian lady. In any case, Harrison was remembered by many as a gifted teacher and brilliant lecturer. In his article on Harrison for the *Dictionary of National Biography*, Cornford noted that she regarded her lectures as "dramatic event[s]," both for herself and her audience. "Once," Cornford wrote, "she enlisted two friends to swing bull-roarers at the back of a darkened lecture room in order that the audience might learn from the 'awe-inspiring and truly religious' sound what Aeschylus [in the *Edonoi*] meant by 'bull-voices roaring from somewhere out of the unseen.'"

Our knowledge of the details of Jane Harrison's life is fragmentary and hampered by her discretion and that of most of her friends and acquaintances. There is also a relative paucity of material: Harrison burned the bulk of her correspondence in 1922 when she left Cambridge, thus erasing much firsthand evidence about her personal life.

important works by

balthus
butler
chagall
dubuffet
giacometti
lam
mac iver
mason
millares
miró
riopelle
rouan
saura
tanguy
zao wou-ki

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Though she suffered through several abortive romances—apparently none of them proceeded far enough to be described as love affairs—she never married and seems finally to have renounced any interest in sex: "I starved the physical side of my nature," she wrote in a letter, "& as sometimes happens with ascetics grew into a certain distaste for it."

Perhaps the greatest love of Harrison's life came late, around 1900, when she met Francis Cornford, who at twenty-six was almost twenty-five years her junior. Their acquaintance deepened into an intimate intellectual friendship, but Cornford seems not to have reciprocated—if, indeed, he was aware of—his mentor's warmer feelings. Harrison introduced him to Frances Darwin, the naturalist's granddaughter, in 1907. Though she seems to have encouraged their friendship, she was devastated when they were married in 1909. Two of her most devoted students, Jessie Stewart and Hope Mirrlees (who was Harrison's close companion from 1909 until her death) collected material for a biography, but only Stewart published anything. Her brief book, *Jane Ellen Harrison: A Portrait From Letters*, appeared in 1959 and (though littered with typographical errors) is still a trove of material on the classicist's life. Consisting of scores of letters from Harrison to Gilbert Murray and others, interspersed with commentary by Stewart, it provides a discreet but reasonably full sketch of Harrison's life, travels, and work, usefully supplementing her own recollections in *Reminiscences of a Student's Life*.

Of course, the durably interesting thing about Jane Harrison is her work, in which she has claim to be a genuine pioneer. Despite her mild eccentricities (that whiskey, those cigarettes) and—as she grew old—her inveterate loneliness and hypochondria, after moving to Cambridge she led a scholar's life: quiet, cloistered, externally uneventful, given over largely to reading, writing, and endless conversation. In her memoirs, she revealingly remarks that "until I met Aunt Glegg in the *Mill on the Floss* I never knew myself: I *am* Aunt Glegg"—though, one wants to add, Aunt Glegg with a twist, Aunt Glegg with a Cambridge education.

True, as one of the first female academics at Cambridge—as well as one of the first prominent female classicists—Harrison's career also possesses a minor sociological interest. One might, for example, wish to ask to what extent her career was hindered—and to what extent it was aided—by her sex. Taken all in all, I suspect that in the end it was aided rather more than hindered, but that is one of those imponderables that can never really be settled. And in truth, given her achievements, it seems a trivial question. At least, so I would have assumed if Professor Peacock had not taken the trouble to write a book to disabuse the world of that assumption.

Jane Ellen Harrison: The Mask and the Self proceeds under the double burden of feminist ire and Freudian smugness. Though the tenets of Freudianism are deeply irreconcilable with feminism, Professor Peacock relies on both throughout her book to give her story a structure and larger purpose. The feminism declares itself every few pages as Professor Peacock assures us that Harrison's "journey from the Yorkshire merchant class to the Cambridge intelligentsia" is a symbol of "the character of female experience in a male-dominated world, the influence of gender on scholarship, and the course of women's intellectual history."

Ah yes, that old workhorse, "female experience in a male-dominated world": what would feminists do without it? How often does some such phrase appear in Professor Peacock's pages? Every page? Or is it only every third page? Tabulating all the references might provide an apt punishment for some particularly obstreperous student. "How do women perceive the world?" Professor Peacock asks. "How do they create? Why is their work valued less highly than men's? All these questions . . . might be asked with regard to Jane Harrison's life. She might have mulled them over as she walked,

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'formidable yet humble,' through Newnham's garden at twilight." She might have; but then again, she might not; and since nothing that we know about Harrison suggests that she was as obsessed by these questions as her biographer, it seems odd to impose them on her. But Professor Peacock's thesis requires that Harrison star in the feminist melodrama she has created for her. The basic plot is that Jane Harrison ("Jane" to Professor Peacock, who, anachronistically, prefers to call her principal characters by their given names) confronted and finally rebelled against the prevailing Victorian (i.e., "repressive," "male-dominated," "bad") ideas about women's role, education, and work.

Indeed, "rebellion," along with its cognates, is another word that occurs with great frequency in these pages. Professor Peacock seems to determine the level of virtue that her (female) characters achieve by how thoroughly they "rebel" against their oppressive Victorian society. "Unfortunately," she comments in one particularly obtuse footnote, "not all women were able to break from their families and survive the alienation education caused. Jane broke successfully from her background, but many of her contemporaries stopped short of total rejection and settled for redefining their roles as women." It is worth pausing for a moment to ponder this extraordinary observation and the view of education, women, and society that it presupposes. Clearly, breaking from one's family is held up as an important accomplishment, almost a moral feat, with "total rejection" being accorded highest honors.

Still, Professor Peacock is no knee-jerk feminist; for example, she generously acknowledges that Harrison's "talent . . . cannot be reduced to the mere fact of her sex . . . . Jane's need to create a self," she informs us, "played an equally important role in her scholarship." And early on in her book she complains that "feminist scholars" in particular, wishing to see in Harrison a model of a successful female intellectual, have failed to understand "how much her scholarly success cost her." These scholars, Professor Peacock says, have taken Harrison too literally, believing her when she claimed to have lived "a happy, satisfying, fulfilled life." If nothing else, Professor Peacock is out to show us that Jane Harrison did not, could not, have lived "a happy, satisfying, fulfilled life." According to her, Harrison "lived a life too marginal and beset by conflict to be entirely carefree. Her periodic bouts with illness and depression and the complexity of her work attest to a fundamental sense of unhappiness about the world." What—does living a fulfilled life require being "entirely carefree"? Who, then, would choose such a life? Are "periodic bouts" with illness or depression evidence of "a fundamental sense of unhappiness about the world"? Who, then, is not fundamentally unhappy? And what does the *complexity* of one's work have to do with the emotional coloring of one's world view, be it gloomy or otherwise? Hegel was by all accounts a reasonably cheerful chap; would Professor Peacock want to say that his work lacked "complexity"?

Yet, reading through this book, it soon becomes clear that, despite her "liberated" principles, Professor Peacock's allegiance to Freudianism trumps even her feminism, and that, given a choice between a feminist and a Freudian interpretation, she can be counted on to opt for the latter. By her own account, her devotion to Freud is just that: devotion. Noting that Harrison had once told Gilbert Murray that she had always wanted to be a Buddhist and, when she discovered what Buddhism was, realized that she had been a Buddhist all along, Professor Peacock confesses that she herself had always wanted to be a disciple of Freud, only to discover when she read his work that she, like Harrison with the Buddha, had been a disciple all along.

One rarely encounters a work in which "psychohistory" is so crudely employed. It is not just that Professor Peacock indulges in the usual psychological babble—assuring her readers, for example, that Harrison "had an overwhelming psychological need for

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attention." She even hauls out all the creaking old Freudian machinery: remember the Oedipus complex? Remember that marvelous sinkhole "the unconscious," as vague as it is seductive? Remember "repression," always useful for explaining away inconvenient facts? In her effort to explore "the complex psychological process that turned personal rage into both chronic illness and innovative scholarship," Professor Peacock employs them all, often to comic effect.

Thus we learn that Harrison's attitude toward sexuality "was overdetermined, of course." Oh, that wonderful "of course"! What could be more knowing, more confident, more . . . vacuous? Well, Professor Peacock does provide herself with stiff competition. The death of Harrison's mother and eventual remarriage of her father offer the perfect grist for her mill. Noting that Harrison later constructed an idealized image of the mother she never knew, Professor Peacock tells us that

> Jane had good reason to construct such a loving memory of her mother. Her death had allowed her daughter to have her father to herself, and guilt over such an effortless Oedipal victory drove her to create an image of a mother good enough not to punish Jane for having won. Jane's recognition of her role in her mother's death represents far more than simple adjustment to a horrifying fact; it also represents a tenuous reconciliation of her culpability with her satisfaction in achieving an Oedipal victory.

Not surprisingly, the most amazing aspect of this "Oedipal victory" is that, in true Freudian fashion, Harrison herself never suspected a thing. What a pity that she is not around to be enlightened by Professor Peacock! She would have learned a number of extraordinary things. For example, Professor Peacock could have told her that the "real root" of her decision to be celibate and not marry "must have lay [*sic*] in her fury at her father and stepmother for creating a circle that she felt excluded her." Forget about the fact that her family helped to frustrate an early love interest, that a man she almost married died suddenly from complications following an operation, that at least two other men she appears to have been in love with married other women—still, the "real root" must lie with her repressed fury and what Professor Peacock likes to call her "inner anger."

Armed with Freud, Professor Peacock even has insight into Harrison's chronic ill-health. Admitting that "a physiological root to these problems cannot be dismissed out of hand," she nonetheless insists that "all of them could have been psychosomatically induced by stress, repressed anger, and unresolved conflict. The incidence of respiratory problems is particularly revealing. Difficulty in breathing may testify to the internalization of anger, and unresolved conflict." Indeed, there's very little Professor Peacock can't explain. Reflecting on Harrison's botched relationship with Francis Cornford, for example, she opines that Harrison "unconsciously drove him away by engineering his romance with Frances [Darwin]." But then Harrison would seem to have been unconscious of a good deal—as, for that matter, were the other characters in Professor Peacock's fantasy. Thus Jessie Stewart and Hope Mirrlees, who "played siblings locked in a rivalry for their surrogate mother's affections," are said to have "unconsciously fought over Jane's affections."

In the introduction to her book, Professor Peacock criticizes the work to date on Harrison because of its "refusal to explore her personality and work in depth." But what she offers us instead is a florid, psychologized portrait of Jane Harrison in which both work and personality are subordinated to two F's: Freudianism and feminism. Only the penultimate chapter of the book deals at any length with Harrison's work, and here it becomes obvious—if it were not so already—that Professor Peacock has very little to add to our knowledge of Harrison's contribution to scholarship. What we get is a merely competent digest of some well-

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known secondary literature on Harrison's ideas, spiced up with some quotations from unpublished letters. Furthermore, if Professor Peacock has any acquaintance with the classics at all, she has kept it superbly concealed—rather a liability, one would have thought, for someone undertaking a critical biography of an eminent classicist. Similarly, her summaries of Nietzsche, Bergson, and Durkheim read like something out of Cliff Notes.

One cannot help remarking that this book had its origin as a doctoral dissertation. While it is more straightforwardly written than many products from the academy these days, it betrays the standard-issue academic thesis-mongering and ideological coloring—and this, remember, was the dissertation of a future assistant dean, someone presumably charged with helping to oversee the intellectual development of graduate students at a major American university. Above all, *Jane Ellen Harrison: The Mask and the Self* represents that hottest contemporary trend: the search for recyclable women. One has the uneasy sense that Professor Peacock had no special affinity for Harrison, that she could just as well have written about Virginia Woolf or George Eliot or Fanny Burney, if only those writers had not been "gone over" so exhaustively already.

But perhaps the most lamentable thing about Professor Peacock's biography—and it is this that makes it emblematic of so much that passes for scholarship today—is that in the name of exalting its subject it winds up condescending to it. Transforming Harrison into a puppet in her psychological road show, Professor Peacock utterly trivializes her scholarly accomplishments. "The great contradiction of Jane's life," she tells us at one point, "was that she combined an intense desire to succeed in a male field with an insistence on using a distinctly female voice." What about Harrison's ideas, her insights into the origins of Greek religion, her dialogue with other scholars? One needn't agree with Jane Harrison's views about the origin of Greek religion (to say nothing of her views about human relations) to admire the passion and restless originality of her mind and the fructifying influence of her work on other writers. It is a pity that Professor Peacock felt compelled to subordinate all this to her Freudian-inspired passion play of feminist redemption.

Down and out in British Columbia

Peter Buitenhuis and Ira B. Nadel, editors
George Orwell: A Reassessment.
St. Martin's Press, 206 pages, $30

reviewed by Terry Teachout

Parodists lead tough lives. Reality keeps catching up with them. Consider *George Orwell: A Reassessment*, a new collection of essays from St. Martin's Press in which are enshrined "the reactions of political scientists, literary critics, social historians and novelists to the Orwell *oeuvre*." Had this compendium been decently edited and marketed as a spoof, it would have been every bit as funny as *The Pooh Perplex*, Frederick Crews's lethally precise send-up of scholarly literary fashions circa 1963.

The comedy begins with the cast of characters. The papers reprinted in *George Orwell: A Reassessment* were all delivered at a 1984 colloquium held in Vancouver, British Columbia, and with the sole exception of Bernard Crick, Orwell's biographer, the contributors are all associated with various Canadian institutions of higher education, the least likely sounding of which is Royal Roads Military College, Victoria, B.C. Their credentials can be collectively summed up by this Pythonesque extract from "Notes on the Contributors":

> *Samuel L. Macey* is Professor of English at the University of Victoria. His books include an edition of *Henry Carey's Dramatic Works*, a volume (with R.G. Lawrence) *Studies in Robertson Davies' Deptford Trilogy*, and he is the author of *Clocks and the Cosmos: Time in Western*

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Life and Thought. His *Patriarchs of Time: Dualism in Saturn-Cronos, Father Time, the Watchmaker God, and Father Christmas* is to be published by the University of Georgia Press.

Professor Macey's contribution to *George Orwell: A Reassessment* is a paper called "From History to Psychological Grotesque: The Politics of Sado-Masochism in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*." Not all of the papers reprinted in this slim volume are quite as awful as that. Graham Good, for instance, has contributed an intelligent essay with the pedestrian but unpretentious title "Orwell and Eliot: Politics, Poetry and Prose," and F. Quei Quo's "Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Mao's Cultural Revolution" is a thoughtful look at how China fared under this century's closest counterpart to Big Brother. But most of the other papers, as Orwell himself would doubtless have predicted, are no better than the cliché-strewn prose in which they are written: "Like Mark Antony before him, Orwell mounts the pulpit as a 'plain blunt man' who will deliver things in their native simplicity and honour; but within his 'objective' discourse we encounter, at every turn, signs that the external world, too, is a text."

Most telling of all, however, is the impenetrable provinciality with which the authors of *George Orwell: A Reassessment* are so heavily armored. ("Given [Orwell's] catholicity," the editors announce in hushed tones, "it was therefore entirely appropriate that the three largest universities in British Columbia should collaborate for the first time in history on an academic conference.") Just think of it: a dozen unknown academics from British Columbia have taken it upon themselves to provide a *re*assessment of the merits of the greatest political writer of the twentieth century. It's a conceit worthy of Max Beerbohm on a good day.

Still, *George Orwell: A Reassessment* deserves fairly high marks on one count: it takes Orwell seriously and, on balance, judges him favorably. Given the current climate of critical opinion, this is no small achievement. Any comparable conference on George Orwell held at a major American university would almost certainly have been peopled with eleven left-wing professors blathering on endlessly about Orwell's cynical betrayal of the masses—and, for good measure, one pink English journalist prettily explaining how *Animal Farm* is really an allegory about the evils of American capitalism.

The reasons for this are in part obvious: Orwell, though an avowed socialist, was a trenchant critic of the realities of life under Marxism, the political system which, despite an endless record of failure, still retains its implacable grip on the imagination of the academy. But his fall from grace goes deeper than that. "To write in plain, vigorous language one has to think fearlessly," Orwell wrote in 1946, "and if one thinks fearlessly one cannot be politically orthodox." This resolute open-mindedness cuts sharply against the grain of present-day academic fashion, so much so that it has become popular to criticize Orwell for his political inconsistencies.

That George Orwell was inconsistent, politically and in every other imaginable way, is undeniable. He believed devoutly in the possibility of a truly egalitarian society, and it was this romantic illusion that made him a socialist; at the same time, as Graham Good observes in his essay on Orwell and Eliot, "Orwell constantly shows the collapse of his own philosophy through his pessimistic view of history and through his defeated fictional heroes." But this inconsistency, which lies at the heart of Orwell's work, is by no means an *artistic* fault, however much it may upset those for whom "politically correct" is a term of high praise. "People who have everything clear in their minds," Edmund Wilson said of George Bernard Shaw,

> who are not capable of identifying themselves imaginatively with, who do not actually embody in themselves, contrary emotions and points of view, do not write novels or plays at all—do not, at any rate, write good ones.

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> And—given genius—the more violent the contraries, the greater the works of art.

To be sure, Orwell was no genius, literary or otherwise. As Lionel Trilling remarked in his introduction to *Homage to Catalonia*: "He seems to be serving not some dashing *daimon* but the plain, solid Gods of the Copybook Maxims." But the contraries in his nature, though they did not enable him to write great novels, lent immeasurable savor to his essays, which crackle with the irascible unpredictability of a man who, unlike Shaw the journalist, has most definitely not made up his mind about everything.

"Novels are about other people," Philip Larkin once said, "and poems are about yourself." Essays are about yourself, too, even when they purport to be about other people, and the enduring interest of Orwell's journalism lies not in its sometimes haphazard logic but in the incomparable vividness of its central character. No character in Orwell's novels, not even Winston Smith, is half as real as the passionate, slightly cranky hero of *Down and Out in Paris and London* and *The Road to Wigan Pier* and *Homage to Catalonia*, a man whom the reader sees just as clearly and surely as Orwell "saw" the face of Charles Dickens: "It is the face of a man who is always fighting against something, but who fights in the open and is not frightened, the face of a man who is *generously angry*." If the face of "George Orwell" is a mask behind which stood a flawed man full of all-too-human inconsistencies, then so much the worse for consistency.

In any case, there was never anything inconsistent (or relative) about George Orwell's moralism, and it kept him from falling into the political pestholes that swallowed up so many other intellectuals in the Twenties and Thirties. "[T]otalitarian ideas," Orwell said of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, "have taken root in the minds of intellectuals everywhere, and I have tried to draw these ideas out to their logical consequences." One mind in which such ideas had not taken root was that of Orwell himself. Though he was a hopeless idealist given to ridiculous posturing, he never contemplated the use of totalitarian methods in order to impose his ideals on the masses; moreover, he told his readers over and over again that the Soviet Union, so beloved of Shaw and his fellow Fabians, was doing exactly that.

This particular manifestation of Orwell's moralism was rooted in a powerful sympathy for the general life of the common people. This sympathy was hard-won, as the second half of *The Road to Wigan Pier* proves, and it is shot through with unmistakable ambivalence. Are Orwell's "masses" the absurdly idealized militiamen of *Homage to Catalonia* or the mindless, hideous proles of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*? His writings offer no final answer to this question. But however he really felt about the masses, Orwell clearly *respected* them. He recognized that his beloved England was in large part their creation:

> One can learn a good deal about the spirit of England from the comic coloured postcards that you see in the windows of cheap stationers' shops. These things are a sort of diary upon which the English people have unconsciously recorded themselves. Their old-fashioned outlook, their graded snobberies, their mixture of bawdiness and hypocrisy, their extreme gentleness, their deeply moral attitude to life, are all mirrored there.

While the egalitarian illusion that lies just back of this respect prevented Orwell from ever grasping (or, more likely, admitting) the fundamental unworkability of socialism, it also shielded him from the totalitarian temptation. Shaw's frank admiration of Stalin may have been extreme, but it was nonetheless utterly characteristic of the Fabians, who had no faith whatsoever in the power of democracy to effect radical reforms and who thus were easy marks for the Big Brothers of their day.

By contrast, though Orwell's faith in the ultimate effectiveness of democracy may

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have wavered, his commitment to it was unswerving. He seems never to have felt that reform was worth the price of a single lie, and the ferocity with which he attacked W. H. Auden for his casual reference to "necessary murders" in the poem "Spain" was one of the few shining lights of a time which Auden himself was later to call a "low, dishonest decade." More than anything else, it is this moral rectitude (and, of course, the marvelously straightforward prose style which is its literary equivalent) that has kept Orwell's writings so fresh and meaningful.

Indeed, Orwell is absolutely central to understanding the politics of our time, which is precisely why he is so repellent to so many of the literary politicians of our time. One might at least have expected the authors of a "reassessment" of Orwell, however obtuse, to have grasped his immediate relevance to the academy. In a critical age where hidden agendas are exalted and surface meanings reflexively dismissed as deceptive or insignificant, there is no place for a writer who valued above all things simplicity and clarity; in a scholarly environment where left-wing orthodoxies are imposed ruthlessly and deviationists are purged without a second thought, there is no place for a writer who held the political pieties of his own time in fathomless contempt. Small wonder that George Orwell is so unfashionable—and so essential.

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Letters

A dissent on Kiefer

To the Editors:
Jed Perl, in "A Dissent on Kiefer" (December 1988), cites me from a *Times Magazine* piece as follows: "I don't think that any of the contemporary American or European painters is as good as Kiefer. He is my bet." I never said this. The irresponsible writer of the *Times Magazine* text "extrapolated" this from an observation that Kiefer was clearly the best of the European Neo-Expressionists of recent years. As the article in question was a Sunday supplement piece, by an unserious writer, I didn't bother to correct it. I see now that was a mistake.

William Rubin
Director Emeritus, Painting and Sculpture
The Museum of Modern Art
New York, NY

To the Editors:
Having written six times, for as many publications, in praise of Anselm Kiefer, I must presume that I am among the "art-world types" dissented from in Jed Perl's "A Dissent on Kiefer," and I would like to reply.

Perl takes the following views of Kiefer's art and of the motives of those who appreciate it: "neo-Nazi campiness," "pornographic obsession with Nazi atrocities," "voyeuristic sentimentalizing of Jewish history," "romantic infatuation with Nazi kitsch," and, in approving quotation of a companion at the Museum of Modern Art opening of Kiefer's retrospective, the incredible sentiment "'six million Jews had to die so all these people could wear black tie.'" These are slanders. Perl should be ashamed. He should apologize.

What is Perl's evidence against Kiefer? The existence of a series of photographs of the artist giving the Nazi salute, an acridly satirical conceptual-art project done when Kiefer was a student in the late Sixties and published in 1975—not in 1969, the date reported by Perl, who almost certainly has never seen the series. Nothing else in Kiefer's work being even faintly sensationalistic, the rest of Perl's dissent is pure innuendo, including his tendentious attack on Mark Rosenthal—whose essay in the retrospective catalogue is a majestic achievement of scholarship and creative sympathy, slurred by Perl as "collusion." Never before in my experience has art-critical discourse sunk so low.

Since Perl accuses Kiefer of bad faith about the Holocaust, one would expect him to address the artist's one series of works on the subject, the "Margarethe/Shulamith" pictures of 1981-3, but he ignores it. These are allegorical landscapes, for the most part, that link the lines "your golden hair Margarethe/your ashen hair Shulamith" from Paul Celan's poem "Death Fugue" to yellow straw and ashy encrustations, figuratively embedding a contemplation of the Holocaust in the heart of Germany in more ways than one. The works are mature, responsible, brave acts of art, whose gravity and anguish are disfigured by Perl's callow posturing.

Perl's execrations make him a bedfellow of Germans who have reacted with rage to Kiefer's

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profoundly ramified acknowledgment that the Third Reich is integral to German culture and history, rather than some bizarre aberration best unmentioned or, failing that, couched in rote, self-exculpating formulae. (See my "Our Kiefer" in *Art in America*, March 1988, for quotes from attacks on Kiefer in the German press consonant with Perl's—all of them variations on killing the messenger of bad news.) People in other countries, notably including Israel, have responded with fascination and excitement to the same acknowledgment, for reasons that do not require references to pornography.

Perl writes: "[Kiefer's] tendency to mythologize everything . . . denies us exactly what we need when we confront Hitler—which is absolute, total clarity." Who is "we"? Most of the world already confronted Hitler in World War II, and defeated him. The deeds of the Third Reich lacerated—and still lacerate—the conscience of every sensitive person, but true clarity demands that the Third Reich be seen as a problem specific to its cultural legatees. How Germans deal with it or, more usually, don't deal with it, is an ongoing drama long watched by many people with interest and anxiety. Kiefer's self-unsparing exploration of the problem—in a measured and clear lexicon of myth and metaphor, tropes indispensable to such an undertaking and "a mist" (Perl's phrase) only to someone whose model of poetry is the telegram—has been an advance for truth deeply illuminating and heartening to such people, who will not soon forget Perl's insults.

Perl's cynicism is bottomless. He imputes to Kiefer the greedy cunning to "gamble . . . on the appeal of the Holocaust as a symbol." This is precisely wrong. Nowhere does Kiefer treat the Holocaust as a symbol. In the Margarethe-Shulamith series, he brings a matrix of symbols to bear on the Holocaust *as a permanent reality*, to be lived with in unremitting consciousness. It is Perl who makes the Holocaust a symbol—of Hitler, whom we are evidently simply supposed to hate with all our might, eschewing any other feeling as an evasion. Perl shows the risk in this: getting all puffed up with vicarious righteousness on the backs of Holocaust victims, whose authority he obnoxiously appropriates for his own reckless uses.

Perl's "absolute, total clarity" really amounts to a claim of absolute, total innocence—an attribute of small children, clowns, and monsters, not of moral beings. Since he is not a small child, Perl may take his pick of the remaining categories. He has perpetrated something thuggish, and until he makes a public confession of error he will not deserve the attention, let alone the respect, of anyone civilized.

Peter Schjeldahl
New York, NY

Jed Perl replies:

It will be a very cold day in August when Peter Schjeldahl and I find ourselves going thumbs up for the same contemporary art. Little points of agreement—yes, maybe. But on the do-or-die issues we'll always be at loggerheads. Nevertheless, I've often enjoyed reading Schjeldahl—he has a way with words. More than that, he has a positive gift for psyching out the Zeitgeist. At least, that was what made his column in the *Voice* some years ago so exciting. Even if you hated David Salle's work, Peter Schjeldahl could make you understand what it felt like to walk into the Mary Boone Gallery and love it . . .

I say all this not in order to prove that I'm the Mother Teresa of art critics. Only I'd like it to be clear that I know something of where Schjeldahl is coming from. Still, I've never felt the urge to excommunicate him from the art world for his taste. I wonder why it is that he wants to excommunicate me. I'll take a quick stab at an answer. Maybe Schjeldahl's Zeitgeist readings are telling him that what I feel about Kiefer is what a lot of people feel about Kiefer. That would certainly account for the note of hysteria in his letter.

As for the content of the letter, I have to fall back on that old saw of replies to letters to the editor: Mr./Ms. So-and-So has missed the point. What does Schjeldahl really say except that 1) Kiefer is great, 2) Perl is wrong, and 3) Perl is horrible? (Strangely, Schjeldahl takes my article as an ad hominem attack on him, when in fact I don't mention him.) I would say that the two central points of my article—neither of which is dealt with by Schjeldahl—are:

1) Kiefer is part of what Saul Friedländer has

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called a "new discourse" about the Holocaust, one which focuses on "voluptuous anguish and ravishing images" and raises "a suspicion of complacency."

2) Kiefer is merely the most visible of a large number of contemporary artists who are taking up Holocaust imagery. The Holocaust itself has become a theme with a tremendous appeal in an art world hungry—indeed, rapacious—for powerful subject matter.

Schjeldahl apparently feels that the Holocaust is but one among Kiefer's subjects. We disagree. All those charred landscapes, charred books: What does he think they make viewers think about? As for Schjeldahl's wondering why I overlooked the Margarethe/Shulamith pictures, two reasons: 1) I think they're bad even for Kiefers. 2) I didn't want to drag poor Paul Celan into it.

Schjeldahl is very concerned with who likes Kiefer and who doesn't. He wants to stuff me in the same bed with the contemporary German critics. He's anxious to tell us that Kiefer has had a good press in Israel. So what? I'm fairly certain that I know the Jewish world better than he does, and I can tell him that there are people in it who are pro-Kiefer and people who are anti-Kiefer.

What I keep wondering is why Schjeldahl has written this letter. Generally, people write letters to the editor because their views aren't being aired elsewhere. But since Schjeldahl has already aired his views on Kiefer in all sorts of high-profile venues, why bother doing so here? I keep coming back to Zeitgeist anxiety—Schjeldahl's. His piece "Our Kiefer," published last year in *Art in America*, is framed in anxious ruminations about Kiefer's greatness. Schjeldahl opens his article with the image of the author at some social gathering where people are wondering: Is Kiefer great, really great, or really really great? Other readers of Schjeldahl's recent *7 Days* columns may have sensed what I've sensed—that the confidence of the early Eighties Schjeldahl is being sorely tried by the late Eighties, which is a time, after all, when nobody, not even Mary Boone, is quoted sounding upbeat. I think Schjeldahl wants to wipe me out because he knows somewhere deep inside that I'm as close to the Zeitgeist as he is.

"Politics of Letters"

To the Editors:

Never until now have I felt impelled to register dissent from a too-enthusiastic assessment of my work, but D. G. Myers's review of *Politics of Letters* ("Marx and English," November 1988) taps reserves of modesty I scarcely knew I possessed. I accept with a blush the personal flattery—"passionate intensity," "unswerving analysis," "a bravura performance," "invaluable"—and will pass these phrases on to my publisher for use in advertisements. But Myers has been heartened by my arguments to a degree that is unwarranted—and dangerous, in that overconfidence may easily subvert our Left project before it has ripened. I caution him against seeing us as a "party in power," just yet, as "the 'center,' the normative position, in the university." If we believe, in his optimistic words, "that radical ideology can now be taken for granted as the common opinion of readers of literary scholarship," we may relax our guard and leave an opening for liberals and conservatives who, though admittedly in disarray, still occupy a small, marginal space in the universities and even in literary scholarship. Until the last one of these mastodons has either retired or spent time in our re-education camps, they will nag, they will nip at our heels, they will bite like fleas. So, Myers: vigilance and steadfastness, until we have finally won the day.

Richard Ohmann
Middletown, CT

To the Editors:

D. G. Myers approaches review assignments with all the finesse of a Mafia hit man, as I found out when he wrote a maliciously dishonest account in *The American Spectator* of a forum I moderated at the 1987 MLA convention on highbrow-lowbrow culture. His vulgar anti-Marxism is again on display in his review of Richard Ohmann's *Politics of Letters* in your November issue. Myers's M.O. is devoid of any semblance of open-mindedness; it consists of approaching any work or statement by a Leftist with the sole intention of finding confirmation of Myers's preconceived stereotypes. Toward that end, he searches for a word here and a phrase there that

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can be made to sound lurid by making up his own context for them out of the repertory of conservatives' simplistic misrepresentation of Leftists. His criticisms consist of derisive insults almost totally devoid of substantive support or rebuttal, and of ritualistic incantations of neoconservative accepted doctrines, such as the assertion that Ohmann's Marxist ideas are "the accepted doctrines of literary study at the present time" (surely a surprise to those of us who teach English in the vast number of universities whose curriculum remains essentially the same as it was thirty years ago; I would be happy to arrange an exchange with any disgruntled conservative at Northwestern or Stanford, whose heart would be warmed today by the lily-white curriculum, faculty, and student body at Cal Poly).

Myers would have loved it if Ohmann's book had been doctrinaire and arrogant. Unfortunately, it is low-keyed, tentative, modest, and qualified almost to a fault. Hmm, how to deal with this? Well, if Ohmann prefaces a brief digression on computers by admitting that he is not an expert on them, then says whimsically, "I may now air my prejudices with only slight interference from the facts," Myers cloddishly takes it literally, as evidence for falsely claiming about Ohmann's entire book, "He feels no need to argue his case."

As for arguing one's case, Myers makes exactly one substantial and accurate criticism of Ohmann: that he regards conventional humanistic education as wholly class-biased without acknowledging that it can also serve as a liberation from class bonds. Fine—I agree. Beyond that, Myers's review is so filled with inaccuracies that it would take more space to point them all out than he used to write them. I urge those interested to read Ohmann's book against Myers's travesty of it, and see for themselves whether the crudeness is in the author or the reviewer.

A sampling of Myers's chronic dishonesty: he claims that Ohmann attacks William J. Bennett and E. D. Hirsch but "does not attempt to *refute* either man." Ohmann not only devotes five pages to direct refutation of Bennett and Hirsch but his criticisms of them form an introduction to two hundred and ninety-three pages of detailed case studies and eighteen pages of footnotes developing the point that Bennett, Hirsch, and Myers ignore: "Human values may be eternal, but cultural systems are not. There is just no sense in pondering the function of literature without relating it to the actual society that uses it, to the centers of power within that society, and to the institutions that mediate between literature and people" (page 5). Likewise for education, literacy, and mass culture, the other topics of Ohmann's book.

Myers's ideological blinders produce the following fictitious summary of Ohmann's book:

> Thus literature by definition is a commodity, the product of a social process (the writer who thinks *he* is the producer of his own work has only mystified his role); literary standards, the principles which govern the production of literature, are not really literary at all—in truth, there is no such quality as "literary"—but are rather a stratagem of the ruling class to extend its moral and political values into another domain; taste, traditionally described as the faculty of aesthetic judgment, "amounts to either class hatred or the snobbishness of the intellectual," and therefore can be more accurately understood as one of the powers of the elite.

Myers seems to have Ohmann mixed up with certain post-structuralist theorists, for whom Ohmann and many other Left critics, myself included, have little use. I challenge Myers to produce direct quotes from Ohmann supporting any of the above account other than in a crassly decontextualized way. Ohmann, like most recent Marxist critics, eschews language like "stratagem . . . domain" in favor of the more complex notions of ideological hegemony and the mediating role of what neoconservatives call "the new class."

Here, then, is Ohmann in person:

> Although the ruling ideas and myths may indeed be, in every age, the ideas and myths of the ruling class, the ruling class in advanced capitalist societies does not advance its ideas directly through its control of the means of mental production. Rather, a subordinate but influential class shapes culture in ways that express its own interests and experience and that sometimes turn on ruling-class values rather critically—yet in a nonrevolutionary period end up confirming root elements of the dominant ideology, such as the premise of individualism. (page 91)

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In the one phrase Myers directly quotes above, Ohmann is not discussing literary taste at all but rather the problem of how we can teach students to think critically about the manipulative rhetoric of mass culture (a goal one should think conservatives share, at least when it involves Leftist manipulation) without belittling them for having accepted that culture as their own: "*Any* criticism can seem a putdown of their own values. Most disastrously, our criticism can seem indistinguishable from highbrow scorn (toward mass culture) grounded in 'taste,' which usually amounts to either class hatred or the snobbishness of the intellectual" (page 208). In other words, Ohmann is making almost exactly the same argument that conservatives make against "elitist" Left critics of consumer culture. Aside from the intrinsic issues in this passage, it is clear that Myers has deliberately distorted its context.

Maybe Myers's problem is that he just can't read. He has Ohmann saying *The Catcher in the Rye*'s "anti-capitalist message was blunted by critics," whereas Ohmann's criticism of the book and its critics is just the opposite—that they failed to identify capitalism as a source of Holden Caulfield's malaise.

Myers is frighteningly typical of a younger group of critics who have jumped on the neoconservative gravy train—Smerdyakovs capable only of parroting the polemical style of better informed critics on both the Right and the Left with no apparent understanding of those they ridicule; thus they project their own incapacity for reasoned, documented argument indiscriminately onto whatever author they wield their hatchet against.

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D. G. Myers replies:

I think I will stand by my original account of Richard Ohmann's *Politics of Letters*. In fact, I believe the passage from the book quoted by Donald Lazere only confirms my account of it. He himself provides the "direct quotes" he challenges me to produce. Ohmann's is not the "low-keyed, tentative, modest" book Lazere makes it out to be. It is a collection of vast claims about culture and society delivered by someone who is relatively secure in his assurance that none of his claims will ever be contested, because few persons engaged in humanistic study in the university are willing to dissent publicly from the ruling orthodoxy of the Left.

Now, Ohmann makes light of any suggestion that the academic Left wishes to eradicate all opposition. But then Lazere tries to do exactly that—to me personally. Read back to back, the two letters achieve an effect quite different from that intended by their authors. Ohmann's wit turns sinister in light of Lazere's vituperation. It's not just that on Lazere's testimony I am stupid or misinformed; I am "maliciously dishonest," I "deliberately distort" things, I write with "the sole intention" of confirming my stereotypical anti-radicalism. (I must be improving. In *The American Spectator* my anti-feminism was "pathological.")

It might be asked how Lazere knows anything at all about my motives, to say nothing of my pathologies. But perhaps a better question would be whether Lazere really desires to see his style of rebuttal become the norm in critical debate. Would he prefer it if I had written not that Ohmann is mistaken in his interpretation of certain literary texts, but rather that he knowingly dupes the students in his classes at Wesleyan? Would Lazere like it any better if I were to reply to his letter by saying, not that he has misunderstood my argument about Ohmann's rhetoric, but rather that he has maliciously defamed a young anti-Marxist critic with the secret hope of blasting his reputation? Unless those who question the motives and scruples of their opponents are willing to see their questions turned back on themselves, they would do better to confine themselves to a discussion of ideas and leave off the playground insults.

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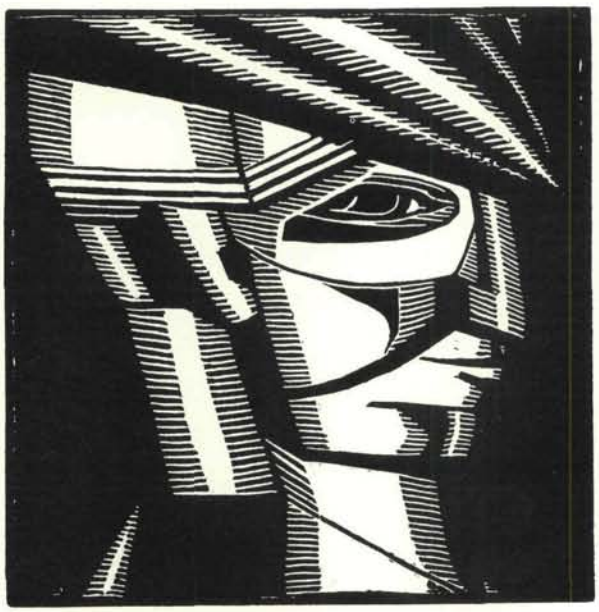

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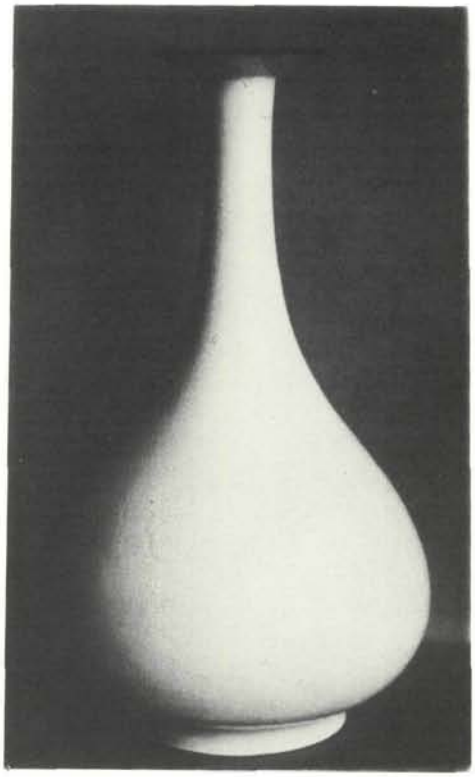

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